

JOHN THE BAPTIST

The Herald of Christ

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PREFACE

John the Baptist as the herald of Jesus Christ was the connecting link between the Old and New Testaments. Like Samuel of old, John closed out one era and ushered in another era. As Samuel concluded the time of the judges in Israel and ushered in the times of the kings, so John the Baptist closed out the law and Moses and ushered in grace and Jesus Christ ([Luke 16:16](#)).

It takes a man of tremendous character to be faithful in a transitional ministry. Such a ministry is extremely difficult. Popularity will rise and fall in a moment's notice. People will not understand nor appreciate this type of ministry well, and the one ministering will have to really know his calling well for he acts without precedence, without the example of past ministries. This book will demonstrate that John the Baptist had the great character necessary to serve in a transitional ministry. No human, in fact, served better, more faithfully, and lived more uprightly than John.

The outstanding salient features of John the Baptist which this book focuses upon include such things as his miracle birth, his disciplined and self-denial living, his challenging preaching to the multitudes, his practice of baptism from which he got his name, his great delight in and devotion to Jesus Christ, and his stand against divorce and remarriage—a stand few take today—which cost him his head. John so excelled in his service and godly living that when reading in the Scripture of John the Baptist's great performance, we are reminded of a statement in Hebrews concerning the great men of faith which says of them, "Of whom the world was not worthy" ([Hebrews 11:38](#)). Surely the world was not worthy of a ministry like John the Baptist, and it will ever be to their condemnation that they did not respond better to it.

I. BACKGROUND

[LUKE 1:5-7](#)

THE APPEARANCE OF John the Baptist on the world scene was a very significant event. It signaled a monumental change in things. "The law and the prophets were until John; since that time the kingdom of God is preached" ([Luke 16:16](#)). John's coming heralded a new day. Shadow would become substance; prophecy would become fulfillment; the focus would shift from Sinai to Calvary; the Gospel, salvation, and the church would come front and center;

and the Gentiles would be included in the family of God. All of this was wrapped up in Jesus Christ, the One Whom John came into the world to herald.

The world into which John came certainly needed his ministry. He came into a hostile, godless world. “Darkness” ([Luke 1:79](#)) is the one-word description of the times given by Scripture, and it is a most accurate and adequate one-word description. The righteous were few and far between. The wicked were in power, and wickedness dominated the deeds of man.

To begin our study of John the Baptist, we will examine in more detail the conditions of the world into which John was ushered. We will note the political conditions, the parental conditions, and the priestly conditions. This will give us a look at the nation, home, and religion that encompassed John at his coming and will thus give us a good picture of just what sort of world John entered.

A. THE POLITICAL CONDITIONS

“In the days of Herod, the king of Judea” ([v. 5](#)) succinctly describe the terribly dark political situation in Israel when John was born. Herod (distinguished from the other Herods of history as Herod “the Great”) ruled over all the land of Palestine. Though called the “king of Judea,” Herod’s rule covered more than the province of Judea. It also took in Galilee, Samaria, and considerable territory east of the Jordan River. Thus as king he ruled over all the land of Israel. Better we should say, as king he oppressed all the land of Israel.

Herod was not a true king of Israel, however. He was not a Jew nor a descendant of David. He was, in fact, an Idumean, an Edomite, which means he was a descendant of Esau. How repugnant this would be to the Jewish mind to have an Edomite, of all things, to sit on the throne of the Jewish nation. What a sad state of affairs this indicated for the Jewish people. Few things would so disgrace the nation of Israel as to be ruled by an Edomite. It was all contrary to the Word of God; it was a reverse of the plan of God. Jacob should rule, not Esau. But Israel had forsaken God, and this was part of their judgment. Great sin brings great judgment. And great judgment it was to have an Edomite ruling them.

Since Herod was not of the line of David nor even a Jew, he did not gain his kingly throne by rightful heritage but had to gain the throne by other means. The means he used was to court the favor of Rome, which was the power of the nations then. Through bribery, fast talking, corrupt politics, and constant scheming, Herod was able to maintain favor with Rome for many years. The prestigious and coveted title “king of Judea” was bestowed upon him by the Roman Senate on the recommendation of Anthony and Octavius about thirty-five years before the birth of John the Baptist. Not all those who ruled for Rome were given the title of king. It had to be gained by political maneuvering. As G. Campbell Morgan rightly says, “The title was the result of his sycophancy with the Roman empire.” But though

Herod was called a king, he was still a vassal of Rome.

Herod was a moral cesspool (he had ten wives), and he was terribly brutal and bloody. He did not hesitate to kill whenever it served his purpose. He killed his competitors. He killed his enemies. He killed a number of wealthy Jews and confiscated their wealth for his own coffers. He even executed a number of the members of his own family. One of his wives, some sons, and other relatives were executed when he felt they were in the way and threatened his rule. Through stabbing, forced drowning, strangulation, poisoning, and other violent means, he executed people. His most famous brutal act is recorded in Scripture. This act was his ordering the killing of all the children two years and under in Bethlehem after the wise men had visited the Christ Child ([Matthew 2:16–18](#)). With such a history of bloody behavior, it certainly is no wonder that one of his sons, Herod Antipas, ordered the beheading of John the Baptist some years later.

But as terrible and treacherous as the days were, it was still “in the days of Herod” that God brought John the Baptist—and also Jesus Christ ([Matthew 2:1](#))—into the world. We must ever remember this fact, for it is a great encouragement to our faith. God delights to show His power in the most difficult of situations, and so we should not be surprised when in the darkest of times God does a great work. God is not limited by the circumstances, by dark times, by great difficulties. We often forget that truth and have a habit of adopting in our mind a theology which limits God to circumstances. When the Herods are in power, we conclude God is shackled. But how foolish and faithless. God is greater than any circumstance, any difficulty, any Herod. And He delights to do great works when the conditions are the worst so that His power will better be seen and honored. How encouraging this should be to His people. When we are in an “in the days of Herod” situation, we need not give up, cease to expect God’s help, and deny our faith. No, we should instead look for and expect God to demonstrate His power.

B. THE PARENTAL CONDITIONS

God always has His remnant even in the darkest of times. Not many were godly at the time John came into the world, as we noted in our introduction; but some were. And what a noble bunch those few godly ones in Israel were: Joseph, Mary, the aged Simeon and Anna, some shepherds, and an elderly priest and his wife—Zacharias and Elisabeth—the future parents of John the Baptist. We want to especially focus on his parents here. In doing so we will note two significant things about John’s future parents: their righteousness and their reproach.

1. Their Righteousness

The character of Zacharias and Elisabeth is given in some detail in Luke’s account. And what we are told by Luke about Zacharias and Elisabeth tells us that John the Baptist would have outstanding godly people for his parents. Like lights piercing the darkness around them, their righteous character shown forth with holy brilliance. “They were both righteous

before God” (v. 6) sums it all up. It is one thing to be judged righteous before man; but when you are judged righteous before God, you are indeed righteous! They walked “in all the commandments [the moral law] and ordinances [ceremonial law] of the Lord, blameless [not sinless perfection, but without legitimate re-proach before man]” (Ibid.).

What a great performance, for they walked in “all” not just a few of the commandments and ordinances, and they did so in a day when just about everyone else lived wickedly. That teaches us a much needed lesson. If Zacharias and Elisabeth could live godly in such times, then so can we in spite of being surrounded by a godless society. We cannot excuse our laxity in holiness on the fact that most people are living unholy lives. The character failures of others does not force or excuse our failures. We do not have to go along with the crowd. Zacharias and Elisabeth prove that fact well.

Of course, not going along with the world will cost. You do not march to a different cadence than the world does without the world getting upset. They will do all they can to get you to conform to their beat (and by the sound of things, much music in our churches certainly has conformed to the beat of the world); and if you do not conform, they can get pretty nasty. But that still does not mean you cannot walk uprightly, nor does it excuse you from walking uprightly.

2. Their Reproach

Zacharias and Elisabeth carried a very heavy burden of re-proach nearly all their married life. We learn some important truths about trials here in the character of this trial, the couple in this trial, and the conduct during this trial.

The character of this trial. The reproach was caused by the fact that “they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren” (v. 7). Furthermore, all hope was gone that they would ever have a child; for “they both were now well stricken in years” (Ibid.). The sting of barrenness will not be appreciated in our age of bloody, heartless abortion. But in those days it was a terrible thing for a Jewish woman to be barren. It took away any hope of the promised Messiah coming from her, and it “was not infrequently looked on as a mark of the Divine displeasure, possibly as the punishment of some grave sin” (H. D. M. Spence). The hopes of Zacharias and Elisabeth would be high and joyous when they were first married. But as time went by, their hopes would diminish and the trial would become heavier as their reproach among men would be ever increasing. The reproach was so prominent in their lives at the time Elisabeth conceived, that the first thing Scripture reports her saying after she conceived was, “The Lord . . . looked on me, to take away my reproach among men” ([Luke 1:25](#)).

The couple in this trial. The trial of John the Baptist’s parents reminds us that righteousness does not exempt one from painful trial. Though “righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless,” still God permitted bitter, burdensome trial to dog their lives for years. Righteousness prevents many trials—those

trials which are a result of sin—but it does not prevent them all as “Many are the afflictions of the righteous” ([Psalm 34:19](#)) attests. Thus to have troubles and trials does not indicate one is a lesser saint. It may mean, in fact, that one is a superior saint; for the best saints are subject to the most attacks by Satan because they are the most trouble to him of all the saints. Furthermore, the best saints will be polished the most by the Lord just as a lapidary puts the best stones to the grindstone the most to bring out their beauty. Hence, the righteous will indeed know trial in their life.

The conduct in this trial. The reaction of Zacharias and Elisabeth to their trial was very exemplary. The trial only served to reveal more fully their godly character. Though burdened with heavy trial, the devotion of Zacharias and Elisabeth to the Lord and His service did not decline. They did not castigate God, forsake Him, complain, and murmur as so many lesser souls do in such times. Rather, they continued to be faithful in all things, trusting God’s wisdom as to the reason for their trial. It was a noble response to the trial, and it is the only way to face trial. As Maclaren said in commenting on their trial of unfulfilled hopes, “Let us learn that unfilled wishes are not to clog our devotion, nor silence our prayers, nor slacken our running the race set before us.”

The world, of course, responds much differently to trial than did Zacharias and Elisabeth. “Curse God, and die” ([Job 2:9](#)) is a favorite response to trial by the world. But no one will face trial victoriously by blaspheming and blaming God and then throwing in the towel and quitting.

C. THE PRIESTLY CONDITIONS

The religious life of Israel rose or fell on the condition of the priesthood. By examining the condition of the priests in Israel at the time of John’s coming into the world, we will learn much about the condition of religion in Israel at that time. In examining the condition of the priests, we will learn about the corruption of the priests, the conspicuousness of the priests, and the consecrated among the priests.

1. The Corruption of the Priests

When John the Baptist came into the world, the religious life of Israel was corrupted because the priesthood was greatly corrupted. One big reason the priesthood was so corrupted was that it was considerably influenced and controlled by Herod. This was done in two significant ways. First, he chose the High Priest; and second, he constructed a very impressive Temple in Jerusalem for the Jews.

Choosing the High Priest. The High Priest was the virtual head of the religious system in Israel. He was over all the priests and had great authority and influence. A good High Priest would improve the character of the land; a bad High Priest would do just the opposite. The important High Priest post was, according to God’s law, to be a lifetime position and one

dictated by one's relationship to Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel. But when John came into the world, the High Priest position was a political appointment. It was being dictated by Herod. Thus the High Priest would curry favor with the wicked Herod, overlook his evils, and encourage and influence the other priests to do likewise—all of which would corrupt the priesthood in a great way. The greatness of the corruption of the priesthood culminated in the priests' terrible opposition to Jesus Christ which was seen so vividly in their leading the people to call for His crucifixion.

Constructing the Temple. Herod's firm and corrupting hand on the priesthood and the religious life of the people was strengthened considerably by his building a new Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was, of course, the hub of the religious life of Israel as it was intended to be from the time of Solomon's Temple. Thus in building the Temple, Herod would ingratiate himself to the Jewish people. They would feel indebted and obligated to him which in turn would give him undo influence over their religious life. Having this control of their religious life meant he had even more control over the people politically—which was Herod's main goal.

Started in 20 B.C., this Temple was a huge and magnificent project that was not completed until some years after Herod died and his sons were ruling the land. The length of time it took to build the Temple is seen in the statement made by some Jews during Christ's ministry, "Forty and six years was this temple in building" ([John 2:20](#)). Herod was quite the builder of buildings. And typical of government, it was done through burdensome taxation of the populace. He built a royal palace, many fortresses, temples for Gentile idolatry, and other edifices. But the building of the Temple in Jerusalem was considered by many to be the greatest of Herod's achievements. Rabbinical literature emphasizes the beauty of the structure by stating that you had not seen a beautiful building until you had seen this Temple. But the beauty of the Temple did not include the beauty of holiness. The Temple was simply a corrupt political ploy of Herod, so he could dominate the people all that much more. In fact, he so dominated things, he was able to put the Roman eagle on the main entrance of the Temple.

2. The Conspicuousness of the Priests

It is believed that there were as many as twenty thousand priests at the time John came into the world. Such a large number of priests meant the priests would be very conspicuous. This conspicuousness helped them to be very prominent and influential in the land. They kept their Temple service (based after the service originating with the Tabernacle) with great care. So much so that we read that Zacharias was "of the course of Abia [[Abijah](#), [1 Chronicles 24:10](#)]" ([v. 5](#)). During David's time, the priests were divided into twenty-four groups to better organize their administration. The groups were named after the sons of Eleazar and Ithamar who were the sons of Aaron. Abijah was the eighth course of the twenty-four. During the captivity, most of these courses lost their identity. "Only four of

these courses (Jedaiah, Immer, Pashu, Harim) returned from Babylon, but these four were divided into twenty-four with the old names” (A. T. Robertson). When John came into the world, the priests were following the twenty-four course set-up to the letter. This would go along with their being so particular about following tradition, but it would also make the administration of the priests more efficient since there were so many priests.

Because of the prominence of the priesthood, “The great national feasts of the Passover, of Tabernacles, and of Pentecost, were celebrated with solemn pomp, and attracted vast crowds from all the world. In every part of the land synagogues were maintained with punctilious care, and crowds of scribes were perpetually engaged in a microscopic study of the law, and in the instruction of the people. In revenue, and popular attention, and apparent devoutness, that period had not been excelled in the most palmy days of Solomon or Hezekiah” (F. B. Meyer).

But it was all superficial. Few worshippers were genuine. As F. B. Meyer adds, “Beneath this decorous surface the rankest, foulest, most desperate corruption thrived.” We have much religion today that is no different. From popular religious TV programs to homosexual churches to the immoral behavior of some so called “fundamentalist” leaders, we see much duplication in our day of the corrupt religious situation that existed in Israel at the time of the coming of John the Baptist into the world.

3. The Consecrated Among the Priests

Though “the general character of the priesthood was deeply tainted by the corruption of the times, and as a class they were blind leaders of the blind” (F. B. Meyer), there were still some who were true and genuine in their piety—Zacharias for one. He was indeed a true priest in both heart and heritage. With the godly character he had, which we noted earlier, Zacharias would not go through the motions in mere outward show in his service as most priests in his day did; but he had his heart and soul in his service. His heritage was superb, too. He was of the line of priests. Not only was he a descendant of Aaron, and thus rightfully a priest; but his wife was also “of the daughters of Aaron” ([v. 5](#)). In fact, her name, Elisabeth, was the same name as Aaron’s wife ([Exodus 6:23](#), “Elisheba” is the O.T. form of the N.T. “Elisabeth”). “To be a priest and married to a priest’s daughter was a double distinction” (Plummer). A. T. Robertson adds that it was “Like a preacher married to a preacher’s daughter.” Would that all priests had been like Zacharias. In fact, would that all ministers even in our day were of the caliber of Zacharias—righteous, a good marriage, morally impeccable, genuine, and devoted to God’s Word.

With both of John’s parents being descended from Aaron, John would be very much entitled to the priesthood. He could claim priestly succession if anyone could. And normally it would have been logical and expected for him to enter the priesthood. But, of course, John did not go into the priesthood. It would have been incongruent with his calling. Instead of the priesthood, John was Divinely commissioned to herald in “that very kingdom of grace that destined to un consecrate and abolish the old order of things” (Grosart), which we noted

in the introduction of this chapter. He would point to the One Great High Priest Who would make it unnecessary to continue the priestly arrangement so honored in the Temple, and Who would establish a pure priesthood composed of born-again believers.

Being born into a priestly family—today we would say he was raised in a preacher’s home—would make John well acquainted with the religious conditions in the land and the corruption it represented. His scathing denunciation of the religious leaders during his public ministry would come from personal, first-hand information of their degradation. He knew from his father’s reports and from his own observation what a farce religion was in his day. Therefore, when he began his public ministry, he would say to the religious leaders, “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 . . . he [Christ] will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner [granary]; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” ([Matthew 3:10,12](#)).

II. BIOGRAPHY

[LUKE 1:8–22](#)

BEFORE THE BIRTH of John the Baptist, in fact, even before the conception of John by his mother Elisabeth, an angel gave a short but very informative biography of John. The angel was Gabriel. This was the angel who appeared to Daniel regarding his visions of the future ([Daniel 8:16, 9:21](#)), and it was the angel who would also appear to Mary to announce to her that she was to be the mother of our Lord ([Luke 1:26–38](#)). To Daniel and Mary you can add the name Zacharias. For it was to Zacharias the priest and the future father of John the Baptist that Gabriel appeared and gave the Divine revelation which was a biography-in-advance of John the Baptist. Zacharias had a rare experience, a choice experience, one he would never forget, and one which we are indebted to Luke for reporting in detail.

If it were not for the Gospel of Luke, much inspiring and instructive information regarding John the Baptist would not be in our possession. All four Gospels speak of John the Baptist. But of the four, only Luke speaks of the events and situations surrounding the coming of John into the world. The other three Gospels begin the story of John the Baptist with the commencement of his public ministry. But Luke begins the story with the announcement by an angel about John’s coming into the world. Luke’s account of John’s coming into the world, which will take up this and the next few chapters, is invaluable in providing a proper understanding and appreciation of the ministry of John the Baptist as well as providing much instruction for our faith and conduct.

In studying this record of Gabriel’s appearance and the revelation he gave to Zacharias of John the Baptist, we will note the moment ([vv. 10–12](#)), the message ([vv. 13–17](#)), and the

mistrust ([vv. 18–22](#)) of the revelation.

A. THE MOMENT OF THE REVELATION

The moment when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias was a special time, a praying time, and a fearful time.

1. A Special Time

The day Gabriel appeared to Zacharias was a very special day for Zacharias. But it became so very much more special than he had ever anticipated. His initial view of the day being special would be in the fact that “his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple [the Holy Place as distinguished from the entire building—two different Greek words are translated ‘temple’ in the New Testament; one refers to the Holy Place, the other to the entire building] of the Lord” ([v. 9](#)). “The office of burning incense . . . was the most coveted of all the priestly duties. The Talmud says the priest who obtained the right to perform this high duty was not permitted to draw the lot a second time in the same week, and as the whole number of the priests at that time was very large—some say even as many as twenty thousand—Farrar conjectures that it would never happen to the same priest twice in his lifetime to enter that sacred spot” (Spence). Because Zacharias was up in years, this once-in-a-lifetime honor would be all that much more special to him.

But while he was offering the incense, something very unexpected happened which made the offering of incense an honor which paled in comparison to this unexpected experience. The angel Gabriel “appeared unto him . . . standing on the right side of the altar of incense” ([v. 11](#)) and told him some of the best news he had heard in his entire life. He told him about John the Baptist—about his coming, his life, and his ministry. This revelation of John made the time far more special than Zacharias could have ever imagined.

2. A Praying Time

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, “the whole multitude of the people [who were gathered at the Temple] were praying without [in an outer court of the Temple] at the time” ([v. 10](#)). When the priest went into the Holy Place to burn incense on the altar of incense, it was the practice of the people at the Temple to be in prayer at that time. They would gather in the outer courts and kneel in supplication to God. The altar of incense is often associated with prayer. The aroma from the incense rising up in the air after being put on the hot coals on the altar, spoke of prayer ascending to God. “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense” ([Psalm 141:2](#)). Therefore, when the priests burned incense on the altar, it was very appropriate that the people should be gathered in prayer.

Adding to the emphasis on prayer at the time of the Divine revelation was the fact that the angel Gabriel mentioned prayer in his speaking with Zacharias. Right at the outset of his message, the angel said to Zacharias, “Thy prayer is heard” ([v. 13](#)). So this time of revelation from heaven about John the Baptist was indeed a time of prayer. Everyone at the scene was

involved with prayer.

God honors prayer, and so it is not surprising that He chose the time of prayer to give the heavenly message to Zacharias and eventually to the people. Prayer does indeed illuminate the hearts and souls of men. Praying men and women will hear more from God than the non-praying crowd. Spend much time in true prayer, and you will not walk in spiritual ignorance.

3. A Fearful Time

Though the visit of the angel was a very special blessing, it did not seem like a blessing at first. For “when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him” ([v. 12](#)). An Israelite had a morbid fear of seeing the supernatural. He thought it was a harbinger of death. Gideon ([Judges 6:22,23](#)) and Samson’s father Manoah ([Judges 13:22](#)) illustrate this attitude. Not only did the Israelites fear the seeing of the supernatural, but the godly also fears such a meeting; for it “reminds us forcibly of our own imperfection, and of our natural unfitness to stand before God” (Bishop Ryle). Later in the Gospel of Luke, we can read of Mary and the shepherds showing this fear at the seeing of the supernatural. While there may be fault in some of these people’s fear, their fear of God is a healthy thing. Such a fear promotes holiness. Irreverence is a far different story. No soul will go wrong by trembling in the presence of a heavenly visitor. There is so much irreverence in regards to God today that it would be a welcome relief to see some fear of the supernatural even if the fear was not always without fault.

Because the visit was not judgmental but was to inform of blessing, the angel put Zacharias’ fears to rest with his “Fear not” ([v. 13](#)). The same thing will be said to Mary ([Luke 1:30](#)) and to the shepherds ([Luke 2:10](#)). Likewise the same message was spoken to Gideon ([Judges 6:23](#)), and Manoah’s wife rightly reasoned with Manoah that he should not fear either ([Judges 13:23](#)). Those who are right with God will have their fears removed. But those who are in rebellion against God will not experience the removal of fear. When judgment brings fear, it is not fear that is removed. It is fear that remains and that also increases. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” ([Hebrews 10:31](#)). In the end time, this terrible fear will have a tenacious grip on many men. “And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman [slave], and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” ([Revelation 6:15–17](#)). Fear God now in reverence or fear God later in retribution.

B. THE MESSAGE OF THE REVELATION

Gabriel told Zacharias many things about John the Baptist in this predictive biography. We count at least a dozen informative statements about John. Though brief, these dozen

statements really say a great deal about John. Some of the statements may appear to overlap or to be a restating of a previous statement, but they are all an important part of the message which Gabriel had for Zacharias, and we will examine each one.

The twelve things we will note here are the coming of John, the naming of John, the rejoicing in John, the evaluating of John, the abstaining by John, the filling of John, the converting by John, the heralding by John, the prototyping for John, the uniting by John, the illuminating by John, and the preparing by John.

1. The Coming of John

The first thing the angel told Zacharias about John was “Thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son” ([v. 13](#)). This tells us three things about the coming of John. First, his coming was an answer to prayer; second, his coming was desired; and, third, his coming was going to be a miracle.

First, *his coming was an answer to prayer*. The message Gabriel spoke to Zacharias informs us that Zacharias (and obviously Elisabeth, too) had been praying for a son. And they had been praying a long time for a son but without success, for they were up in years and their prayer had not yet been answered. However, delay in answering prayer does not necessarily mean denial. God knew the best time for the son to be born, and He would answer the prayer when it was best to do so. Delay will test our earnestness; but it will also manifest God’s wisdom. Let this encourage our continued praying even though answers may not come quickly.

Second, *his coming was desired*. Obviously you do not pray for a son unless you want one. Wanting a child is a healthy desire. Our age has trouble appreciating this desire, however, with the emphasis on abortion and the abundance of unwanted children in society. But if all parents were praying parents like Zacharias and Elisabeth, there would not be the problems of abortion and unwanted children in the land; and there would be a much better perspective regarding the home, too.

Third, *his coming was going to be a miracle*. The prayer for a son had been delayed so long that Zacharias and Elisabeth had gotten beyond child-bearing ability. For them to have a child at their age would require a miracle. But Gabriel said they were going to have a son anyway. Like Abraham and Sarah of old, these two saints of God would experience a Divine miracle by having a child when they were past the years of having children. Delay in answering prayer not only shows the wisdom of God, which we have just noted; but it also can show the power of God, too. God may delay the answering of our prayer until all human hopes and helps are gone so that we will more fully see, appreciate, and honor His great power in answering our prayer.

2. The Naming of John

Zacharias and Elisabeth were not permitted to choose the name for their son (and it would be nice if a lot of other parents were also prohibited from naming their children,

seeing the strange and unbecoming names they give their children). Gabriel informed Zacharias what heaven decreed as his son's name. "Thou shalt call his name John" (v. 13). John is one of seven people whom Scripture records as being named before they were born. The other six are Ishmael, Isaac, Solomon, Josiah, Cyrus, and Jesus.

The meaning of the name John involves the grace of God. "Jehovah shows grace" (Godet); "the Lord is gracious" (F. C. Cook); "God is gracious" (A. T. Robertson) are some of the renderings. It was a fitting name for one who was to herald the day of grace. The meaning of John's name symbolized the whole series of events that were to come in Christ and the Gospel. Today, we call all of this the age of grace. So it was most appropriate that it all started with an announcement that focused on one whose name meaning involved the grace of God.

3. The Rejoicing in John

John's birth would bring joy to many people. The angel said to Zacharias, "Thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth" (v. 14). The joy was great joy; for the word "gladness," according to A. T. Robertson, is "A word for extreme exultation."

It is not difficult to understand why John's parents would rejoice in his coming. They had a threefold reason for rejoicing. They would rejoice in John because of the delight of having a child, because they had been so long without a child, and because of what the child was to be. Others rejoiced in John's birth because of their friendship and relationship to John's parents and because of the events, predictions, and meaning of his birth to the Israelites. So there was certainly a great deal in which to rejoice about in John's birth.

God's blessings cause people to rejoice, but when we get sin's promised "blessings," it is a far different effect on mankind. The joy over John was involved with spiritual things—godliness, prayer, the coming Redeemer, and soul salvation. This is where real joy is found in life. But the only joy most people know anything about is in temporal things, and such joy is just that—temporal.

4. The Evaluating of John

Heaven's evaluation of John was stated by Gabriel when he said, "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord" (v. 15). That is true greatness. Greatness only in the sight of man is not true greatness. Maclaren said, "No epithet is more misused and misapplied than that of 'a great man.' It is flung about indiscriminately as ribbons and orders are by some petty State. Every little man that makes a noise for a while gets it hung around his neck." Bishop Ryle said, "Princes and potentates, conquerors and leaders of armies, statesmen and philosophers, artists and authors—these are the kind of men whom the world calls 'great.' Such greatness is not recognized among the angels of God. Those who do great things for God, they reckon great. Those who do little for God, they reckon little. They measure and value every man according to the position in which he is likely to stand at the last day."

As we noted in our first chapter, the Herod who reigned when John was born is often referred to in history as Herod “the Great.” But you will notice the Bible does not call him great. It calls John the Baptist great, but it does not call Herod great, for heaven evaluates on a far different basis than the world does. The world would not have called John great in his lifetime. “How Herod or Pilate or Caesar, or philosophers at Athens, or rabbis in Jerusalem would have scoffed if they had been pointed to the gaunt ascetic pouring out words, which they would have thought wild, to a crowd of Jews, and been told that that was the greatest man in the world (except ONE)! The elements of greatness in the estimate of God which is truth, are devotion, clear recognition of Jesus, and humble self-abnegation before Him. These are not the elements recognized in the world’s Pantheon. Let us take God’s standard” (Maclaren).

5. The Abstaining by John

“He . . . shall drink neither wine nor strong drink” ([v. 15](#)). It is instructive that right after it was said that John would be great in the sight of the Lord, it next says he will not drink wine or strong drink. The two go together. You will never be a great man in the sight of God if you are given to drink.

A number of writers believe this statement means that John was to be a Nazarite. But there is nothing else in Scripture to verify that conclusion. However, whether he was to be a Nazarite or not, the abstaining of John indicated he was not living for the senses, but for the soul. Self-denial was practiced. His fleshly appetites were put in check and made subservient to his spiritual service. No wonder John succeeded in God’s sight.

No man will do much for the Lord if his fleshly appetites are not made servants instead of masters. The Apostle Paul addressed this matter when he said, “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means . . . myself should be a castaway” ([1 Corinthians 9:27](#)). Society is littered with those who failed to keep their fleshly appetites in check and, as a result, became a castaway in God’s service.

6. The Filling of John

Gabriel declared that John “shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb” ([v. 15](#)). This does not mean he was saved before he was born, nor does it justify infant baptism as some of the old writers insist (such as Bishop Ryle and Matthew Henry who were good men, but who had a theological blind spot in this matter). Filling is associated with service, not salvation. Therefore, this filling of John means he will be Divinely equipped and empowered for his ministry. God had His hand on John from the very moment of conception.

As the close association in our text of John’s greatness with his abstaining from strong drink instructed us, so the close association in our text of the filling of John with the Holy Spirit and his abstaining from strong drink will instruct us. The associating of these two things together is also found in [Ephesians 5:18](#). “Be not drunk with wine, in which is excess,

but be filled with the Spirit.” The one who is drunk will be completely controlled by drink, and he will do things and say things he normally would not do or say. The servant of God is to be controlled like this, but by the Spirit of God instead of drink. He is to be so filled with the Holy Spirit that the Spirit will control him completely and cause him to do things and say things he normally would not and could not do. Of course, in contrast to drink, the one under the influence of the Spirit will do good things. Such was the case of John the Baptist. Filled with the Spirit, he was controlled by the power of heaven and served with great excellence not possible to do apart from the aid of the Spirit of God.

We all need the help of the Holy Spirit if we are going to serve God with any degree of success. We cannot serve in our own strength and wisdom alone. We must have Divine help or we will fail miserably. “Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it; except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain” ([Psalm 127:1](#)).

7. The Converting by John

John’s ministry would result in many folk coming to the Lord, for Gabriel said, “And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord, their God” ([v. 16](#)). So many people and works and organizations do just the opposite. They turn people away from God, away from His Word, away from His commandments. But John would not do that. His goal was to get people to turn to Christ—as “Behold the Lamb of God” ([John 1:29,36](#)) indicates. He was ever pointing to Jesus Christ as the One to follow. Israel, like many in every age, was following the pipers of sin. They needed to turn from them and turn to the Lord; as those in Thessalonica did who in Paul’s time “turned to God from idols” ([1 Thessalonians 1:9](#)).

Every believer ought to be living a life that points to Christ. If people listen to you, where will they turn? Does your life and lips encourage men to turn to sin or to the Savior? It does one or the other.

“Turn” reminds us that when a person gets saved there will be some changes in their life. We are witnessing a popular attitude today which wants a salvation without the turning from the world. It is the impossible idea that we can turn to the Lord without turning away from sin. For if you turn to the Lord, you will automatically turn away from the other. You cannot face two different directions at once. Telling us you have turned to the Lord when you are still going after the world is trying to tell us something has happened that hasn’t.

8. The Herald by John

John was to be the herald of Jesus Christ. Malachi had predicted a herald would come to prepare the way for the Lord. “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me” ([Malachi 3:1](#)). Gabriel makes it clear that John is this herald, this forerunner of the Lord, when he says of John, “He shall go before him [the Lord].” ([v. 17](#)).

“A herald was usually a representative of a royal or government official having as his specific responsibility the bearing of a message. The message and whom he represented was his primary concern, and he was to remain secondary” (G. Giacomakis). John surely fit

well this description of a herald. He certainly was faithful in proclaiming the message. He also was careful to remain secondary and keep Christ primary. This is seen in his “He must increase, but I must decrease” ([John 3:30](#)) and in his insistence that Christ be viewed as the bridegroom and John simply as a friend of the bridegroom ([John 3:29](#)).

There are a number of ministers today, even in fundamentalists’ ranks, who need to be reminded of these practices of the forerunner. They need to put more emphasis on the message, and they need to put more emphasis on Christ and less on themselves.

9. The Prototyping for John

The prototype for John’s ministry was the prophet Elijah. Gabriel made this known when he said of John, “He shall go . . . in the spirit and power of Elias [Elijah]” ([v. 17](#)). Bishop Ryle wisely cautions us, “Let it be carefully noted that Gabriel does not say that John shall be Elias himself, but that he shall go ‘in the spirit and power of Elias.’” John’s ministry was like Elijah’s ministry, but it was not Elijah in person.

Maclaren said, “No two figures in Scripture are truer brethren in spirit than Elijah the Tishbite and John the Baptist.” Indeed, they certainly have many parallels in their work. They both had the spartan spirit, for both lived in the wilderness and dressed in the same spartan way ([2 Kings 1:8](#), [Matthew 3:4](#)). They both had heavenly power to shake a nation’s conscience, denounce sin, and boldly confront the wicked leaders of their day. They both had a wicked king and queen to deal with. Elijah had Ahab and Jezebel; John had Herod and Herodias. And both of these wicked women sought to kill their respective prophets. John and Elijah each had their down times, too; for Elijah had his juniper tree experience, and John had his doubts in prison.

We hear much talk today about “role models.” Athletes like to think of themselves as role models. Hollywood stars and others like to be esteemed as such, too. But what lousy role models are these greedy and immoral stars of men. We can find much better role models almost anywhere, especially in the Scripture. What great role models are Elijah and John the Baptist! Oh, that our young people, who are so prone to idolize the cheap heroes of the day, would begin to look to these two men instead and pattern their lives after them.

10. The Uniting by John

John’s ministry would unite people in the right way. Gabriel told Zacharias that John would “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” ([v. 17](#), cp. [Malachi 4:5,6](#) where this same work is specifically mentioned and associated with Elijah who, as we just noted, is John’s prototype). Sin alienates us from those with whom we should be friends; it divides us from those with whom we should be united. Fathers and children should be united. They should be bound together in love and affection and devotion. But, alas, sin wrecks and ruins this relationship which speaks of the home. John’s ministry, however, which denounced sin and pointed men to Christ, would beneficially affect the home. “The effect of true religion on a family will always be to produce harmony” (Barnes). “One of the first results of conversion,

[is] the revival of love in the home” (A. T. Robertson).

We need more preachers like John the Baptist whose ministry is pro-home. To do this, however, will require many preachers to change their attitude about divorce. As we will learn later, John adamantly opposed divorce. Anyone who is pro-home will indeed oppose divorce.

11. The Illuminating by John

Another great result of John’s work on earth which Gabriel foretold was that John would “turn . . . the disobedient to the wisdom of the just” ([v. 17](#)). When folk turn from sin to the righteousness, they will think differently. Their minds will be illuminated with heavenly wisdom. Sin darkens the mind. Righteousness illuminates it. John’s preaching would result in many having their minds illuminated with heavenly wisdom.

The “wisdom of the just” is moral wisdom, spiritual wisdom, the wisdom of righteousness, the best wisdom of all. Such wisdom is not seen much in our day or in any day, however. Because sin dominates, men act so stupid in vital areas of life. Just look at the foolish behavior of our government, and you will see this problem readily. Alcohol brings about some 25,000 or more deaths a year on the highway. So what does our government do? Do they make laws to outlaw alcohol which the wisdom of the just would do? No, walking in disobedience as they do and thus lacking the wisdom of the just, they strain at the gnat and swallow the camel ([Matthew 23:24](#)) in dealing with the problem. So they major on making laws forcing auto manufacturers to install air bags, seat belts, and other devices in the cars while they let alcohol continue to flow. AIDS, the curse of homosexuality, stalks the land as a deadly killer. What does our government do? Do they condemn homosexuality and lock up all the homos which the wisdom of the just would do? No, lacking the wisdom of the just, they tell folk to use condoms and then pass laws giving respectability to homosexuality. Two-thirds of the murders in our land are caused by repeaters who have either escaped from prison or have been paroled. What does our government do to stop this problem? Do they resort to capital punishment, which is Biblical, which is the wisdom of the just, and which would cut murders by two-thirds because it would stop repeaters from murdering? No, lacking the wisdom of the just, they build more comfortable prisons with bigger TV lounges and a host of other comforts for the murderers, thinking that will solve the problem. Former Supreme Court Justice William Brennan epitomizes the lack of the wisdom of the just in government when in attempting to define obscenity, he said, “I tried and tried and waffled and waffled and finally gave up.” If he had possessed the wisdom of the just, he would not have had any trouble whatsoever in defining obscenity.

Wisdom of the just is the wisdom to do what is right, and it comes only from a right relationship with God, from obedience to God. Until we have that relationship, our mind will be dark and unable to reason well in the most important areas of life. “The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble” ([Proverbs 4:19](#)) because they lack the wisdom of the just.

12. The Preparing by John

The final thing the angel Gabriel said about John was that he would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17). “Prepared” here means to be “adjusted, disposed, placed in the right moral state” (Vincent). It takes preparation to meet God. This fact was emphasized by the prophet Amos when he said, “Prepare to meet thy God” ([Amos 4:12](#)). Those who heeded John’s message were ready to meet Jesus Christ properly. When Christ came on the scene, they bowed down to Him; they received Him; and they were blessed by Him as a result. But many did not listen to John; hence when Christ came, they were not prepared to receive Him properly. They despised Him and wanted Him crucified. How great the judgment was and still is on those unprepared to meet Him.

If we expect to meet God successfully, we need to be properly prepared. And the only way to be properly prepared is to receive Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. Lacking this we will not be prepared for the Lord, and we will suffer all eternity for this lack of preparation. We prepare for many things today, some good and some questionable. Especially are we ever preparing for things by buying insurance. Often we buy insurance to be prepared for a host of things which never happen. But the most important thing one needs to be prepared for—our meeting with God—is that which is absolutely certain to happen. Yet, in spite of the certainty of this event, few prepare for it properly. And great is the tragedy of such a failure. In fact, there is no greater tragedy than failing to prepare to meet God.

C. THE MISTRUST OF THE REVELATION

Zacharias did not believe the angel. As soon as the angel Gabriel finished telling about John the Baptist, Zacharias vented his unbelief. It was not a good reaction by Zacharias to the wonderful revelation from the angel.

Now if such a great message from such a credible messenger was not believed by such a good man, should God’s preachers be surprised if their message and ministry is rejected by carnal church members and ungodly worldlings? Rejection hurts and often causes one to be pessimistic about his performance. But let God’s ministers remember and be encouraged from this situation that being rejected does not mean they have failed. Gabriel certainly did not fail. Unbelief is not a discrediting of the messenger, but it is a discrediting of the unbeliever. Let not unbelief so discourage the servant of God that he gives up. All true servants of God will experience rejection sometime or other in their ministry. Gabriel was rejected and the Greatest of them all, Jesus Christ, was rejected by the large portion of the people He ministered to in His earthly ministry.

In considering the unbelief of Zacharias, we will note the comment of unbelief, the commonness of unbelief, the cause of unbelief, the condemnation of unbelief, the curse on unbelief, and the crippling by unbelief.

1. The Comment of Unbelief

Zacharias revealed his unbelieving attitude when he asked, “Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years” (v. 18). That this was indeed

a statement of unbelief is confirmed by Gabriel's response to it when he said, "Because thou believest not my words" (v. 20). This comment by Zacharias appears on the surface to be practically the same thing that Mary said to Gabriel after he told her she was to be the mother of our Lord. Her response was, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1:34). But it is obvious from the angel's reaction to her comment that she was not being a skeptic and questioning Divine revelation as Zacharias did. So what is the difference in the two comments that makes one unbelief and the other faith though they look so much alike? The answer is that Mary, unlike Zacharias, was not questioning God's ability; she only wanted to know about the means God would use. She believed; but because her circumstances were what they were, she was very curious as to know how God would accomplish the deed. Zacharias on the other hand did not believe God could even do it. His question "How shall I know?" indicated he wanted more proof, more evidence, which in view of all the evidence before him is nothing but stubborn unbelief.

The similarity of the statements of Zacharias and Mary reminds us that unbelief likes to sound like faith, and oftentimes it does fool the spiritually naïve. Many carnal saints cannot tell the difference between a Zacharias-type statement and a Mary-type statement in the pulpit. And when a fundamentalist preacher comes along and points out the difference, the carnal often get upset and think the fundamentalist is not showing any love. But there is a world of difference in the two statements; and there will be found to be a world of difference between what the apostate says and the fundamentalist says, even though on the surface they sound much alike. As an example, the apostate will talk about the "spirit of the resurrection" which causes the carnal to believe the apostate does indeed believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But think again; he is speaking only of the "spirit" of the resurrection; he is not speaking of the actual bodily resurrection of Christ. He is referring only to the inspiration one may get from the general idea of a resurrection, not from the actual resurrection of Christ itself. It is a clever word game and fools many. Therefore, we need to study the Word diligently to know the truth well lest we be carried away to our destruction by false doctrine.

2. The Commonness of Unbelief

We generally think that unbelief is going to be found only in the world, in scoffers, in hardened sinners, and in apostate religious leaders. And indeed it is found there in abundance. But the comments of Zacharias reveal to us that unbelief is sometimes also found in good people. Zacharias certainly was a godly soul, for the Scripture attests to that fact as we have noted in the previous chapter. But here in this incident we see unbelief in his heart.

Unbelief is not a rare thing. It is so common that it can get into the best of the hearts if allowed to do so. Even Moses reflected unbelief at times when leading the children of Israel. We are warned from all of this that our faith must be earnestly maintained, or it will cease to function well, no matter who we are. Faith, like good health, does not continue if it is not cared for properly. To maintain health, we must eat properly, exercise, and keep away from

places that would be detrimental to our health. So it is with our faith—our spiritual health. We must regularly feed our faith on the Word of God, keep active in service for God, and stay away from dens of iniquity and apostate religious places which would harm our faith.

3. The Cause of Unbelief

What caused Zacharias to demonstrate such unbelief in the Divine revelation about John? The answer is that he focused on the circumstances rather than on the promises of God: “For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.” This is exactly what the ten spies did who viewed the promised land. They focused on the giants rather than on God. As a result, they insisted the promised land was impossible to take. Whenever we focus on our problems, difficulties, and trials instead of on God, we will practice unbelief. Our circumstances are often not much help at all in encouraging our faith. Therefore, we had better concentrate on the promises of God rather than on the circumstances if we want to walk in faith.

We generally think that unbelief is caused primarily by ungodly professors, apostate preachers and theologians, worldly scoffers, and the like. But Zacharias’ unbelief reminds us that unbelief can be caused by discouragement, too. Allowing discouraging circumstances to take our eyes off of God can bring about unbelief just as easily as listening to some skeptic.

4. The Condemnation of Unbelief

Zacharias’ unbelief was very inexcusable. His condemnation for his unbelief is great because he had some great advantages and opportunities to help him believe. We see at least three significant advantages which made his unbelief inexcusable. They are the *envoy* to Zacharias, the *examples* for Zacharias, and the *experience* of Zacharias. First, the *envoy*. Zacharias was given the revelation of John by none other than the angel Gabriel, God’s envoy to Zacharias. That surely ought to have encouraged him to believe the message. Second, the *examples*. Zacharias had some great examples to encourage his belief of Gabriel’s message. Abraham and Sarah had Isaac when they were both past child producing age. And the birth of Samson and Samuel were to women who had been barren a long time. Third, the *experience*. Zacharias was an experienced saint, one who should have learned long before to respond better to Divine revelation. Yes, he had plenty of help to encourage him to believe the message which said he and Elisabeth would have a child even though they were up in years. But he ignored all the great helps to his faith and walked in unbelief instead.

What a contrast Mary is to Zacharias here. Mary did not have nearly the advantages Zacharias did, but she still believed. Like Zacharias, she did have the advantage of the envoy, for Gabriel visited her as well as he did Zacharias. But Mary did not have the advantages of examples and experience as did Zacharias. Mary did not have any examples to encourage her about a virgin birth. No one before her had ever given birth as a virgin. And she did not have the experience in spiritual matters as did Zacharias, yet she believed Gabriel.

Oh, how condemned unbelief is. We often try to excuse it, but it has no excuse whatsoever. If we would stop and pay attention, we would discover that God has done more to encourage our faith than what we realize. But if we are not good stewards of our spiritual opportunities and advantages, we can walk in unbelief just as though we lived in heathen darkness. A man who has a light in his hand but refuses to turn it on in the dark will walk in just as much darkness as the man who does not have a light in his hand.

5. The Curse on Unbelief

Unbelief comes under the anathema of God. It will be judged, and it was judged quickly in the case of Zacharias. “Behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season” (v. 20). We note three aspects of this judgment upon Zacharias for his unbelief: the instructiveness, appropriateness, and painfulness of the judgment.

The instructiveness of the judgment. That this unbelief resulted in Divine judgment teaches us two important truths about unbelief. It instructs us about the unacceptableness and offensiveness of unbelief to God.

First, the *unacceptableness of unbelief* to God. We need this truth emphasized because the world has made unbelief honorable. It does not find unbelief unacceptable at all. To doubt the Bible, be a skeptic about God, and scoff at the faith of the godly is thought to be a mark of intelligence by a good many in this world. To hear many college professors and a number of ministers talk, you would think it is really a mark of ignorance to believe the Word of God. They do not scorn unbelief, that’s for sure; rather they exalt it. But God does not honor it. The judgment here upon Zacharias shows that fact plainly.

Second, the *offensiveness of unbelief* to God. The judgment here says unbelief is no trivial offense, but a serious one. Indeed it is a serious one, for Zacharias’ unbelief virtually called God a liar. That is a very serious charge; for when you call God a liar, you are really attacking His character. We may not see what is so bad about Zacharias’ protest; but when it is put in the perspective of calling God a liar, it certainly becomes a serious offense! We do not treat lightly the personal accusation of being called a liar. How much more justifiably does God get upset when called a liar, for He is absolute truth.

The appropriateness of the judgment. The judgment upon Zacharias was to be made dumb (and obviously deaf also, cp. [Luke 1:62](#)). Because he spoke in unbelief, Zacharias will, in judgment upon his unbelief, be silenced so he cannot speak. The lips that spoke in unbelief will be silenced. How very fitting is this judgment upon the unbelief of Zacharias. And it shows what God will do to all unbelief. He will eventually silence it. Today it seems that unbelief has the floor and is doing all the talking, but God will have the final word; and when He is through, every mouth of unbelief will be “stopped” ([Romans 3:19](#)).

The painfulness of the judgment. One of the most distressful experiences for Zacharias of this nine months of dumbness would be his inability to communicate well with his wife. If ever there was a time when these two would want to talk together, it would be during those days after the announcement of the angel. For years they had prayed for a son, but it seemed all in vain. Now a miracle of God is going to bring a son to them. How they would want to talk together about this wonderful coming event. But they cannot, for Zacharias is dumb and deaf and cannot communicate well. Furthermore, the angel's message told Zacharias so many exciting and inspiring things about John. Oh, to be able to tell Elisabeth every detail of the message and to discuss with her the whole situation and its ramifications for the whole land of Israel. But he cannot, for he is dumb and deaf. Communicating is very difficult, hence very incomplete. His punishment for unbelief hurts. It always does, for we lose so much blessing through unbelief.

6. The Crippling by Unbelief

Unbelief really cripples our service for God. We see this well in the experience of Zacharias when he came out of the Holy Place to face the people. "And when he came out, he could not speak unto them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; for he beckoned [made signs] unto them, and remained speechless" ([v. 22](#)). What a tragedy that he could not speak here. How it crippled his service. He could not tell them in detail all that the angel had told him. He could not declare to them the best news they would ever have heard in their life. He was limited to making but a few crude signs which would only convey a small fragment of his experience.

Unbelief will cripple service for God every time. Especially will it hinder the proclamation of a life giving message. It will make the pulpits dark. It will keep the people in the dark. It will make the Bible a closed book. The great truths the people ought to know will not be made known. Unbelief will keep them hidden, concealed, covered. You will never serve God well until you walk well by faith. Unbelief will cripple you so your service will be very limited in value.

III. BIRTH

[LUKE 1:57-66,76,77,80](#)

IT WAS AN exciting time when John was born. It is generally an exciting time whenever a new child comes into the world. But the circumstances surrounding the birth of John made his birth much more exciting than the usual birth of a child. First, John was a miracle child. He was born to parents past the years of childbearing. Second, his birth took away a very bitter trial for his parents by removing the very painful reproach of barrenness. Third, his

birth was preceded by some unusual experiences for his father (Zacharias had seen a vision in the Temple and had suddenly become mute). And fourth, in celebrating the birth of John at the time of his circumcision, some things occurred (the confirmation of the unexpected name for the child, the sudden healing of Zacharias' dumbness, and the prophecy Zacharias spoke with his restored tongue) which added even more excitement to the already very exciting situation. Yes, it was not the usual experience of a child coming into the world. It was a very special birth. Even the casual observer could easily see that fact.

In this chapter we will examine the birth of John and the events which accompanied and followed it. To do this we will consider the delivering of the child ([vv. 57, 58](#)), the dispute about the child ([vv. 59–63](#)), the declaration about the child ([Luke 1:64,76,77](#)), the discussions about the child ([vv. 65, 66](#)), and the development of the child ([Luke 1:66,80](#)).

A. THE DELIVERING OF THE CHILD

“Now Elisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her cousins [relatives, not just what we call cousins today] heard how the Lord had shown great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her” ([vv. 57, 58](#)). These two verses regarding the delivery of John tell of the receiving of a promised blessing and of the rejoicing in a promised boy.

1. The Receiving of a Promised Blessing

The birth of John the Baptist was the fulfillment of a Divine promise given to Zacharias and Elisabeth some nine months earlier. The promised blessing was received when the “full time came” ([v. 57](#)). This tells us that both patience and punctuality were involved in receiving the promised blessing.

Patience. Between the giving of a Divine promise and the fulfilling of it will be a lapse of time generally long enough to try the patience of any saint. “Ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise” ([Hebrews 10:36](#)) confirms that truth well. Though Zacharias and Elisabeth were not involved in an indefinite time of waiting for the fulfillment of the promised son, yet it would require some patient waiting anyway. Zacharias would wish for the days to pass more swiftly because of his being condemned to muteness until the fulfillment occurred. Elisabeth would want the day to hasten when she no longer had to endure the reproach of barrenness. But they must wait the “full time” before the child is born and for several good reasons. First, the child—the blessing—needed all that time to fully develop before he was born; and, second, Zacharias and Elisabeth needed the time to be adequately prepared to receive the blessing. Physical and material preparation needed to be made in order for the home to be able to receive and care properly for the blessing.

So it is with the fulfillment of all Divine promises. If we want the fulfillment of the promise to be all that it is supposed to be, we need to wait patiently for it. First, we need to

wait patiently for it to develop completely. We do not want to pluck the fruit before it has become ripe. It will be very disappointing if we do. If John had been born prematurely, it could have been a disaster, not a blessing. Second, we need to be prepared to receive and care properly for the blessing; or we will ruin the blessing when it comes. If someone gives you a gift of food which requires refrigeration, the gift will be spoiled if you have no means of refrigerating it. Better wait until you have the means of refrigeration before the gift is made. God's blessings are not dissimilar. We need preparation spiritually, physically, and materially to take care of God's blessings adequately. That takes time and tests our patience. But it is very vital to the full realization of the promised blessing.

Punctuality. When the "full time came . . . she brought forth a son" ([v. 57](#)) reminds us of "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son" ([Galatians 4:4](#)) and "In due time Christ died for the ungodly" ([Romans 5:6](#)). God is punctual about fulfilling His promises. He always operates right on schedule. When the full time was up, the child was born just as promised. But sometimes when we look at the circumstances, we often wonder if God is going to be on time. Zacharias and Elisabeth were up in years and beyond childbearing ability. From a human standpoint it looked like God was too late in this situation. But the promise of God was not affected by their circumstances. God's Word is always true; and what He promises, He will do. So when the "full time came," they had a son.

How encouraging this is to us when our situation looks impossible from the natural standpoint. But the promises of God have priority over our problems. God has given us something better than our circumstances upon which to build our hopes. He has given us His promises. And they will be fulfilled punctually no matter how our circumstances appear to obstruct the coming of the promised blessing.

2. The Rejoicing in a Promised Boy

Relatives and neighbors gathered to rejoice in the birth of John. The home of Zacharias and Elisabeth would witness a constant stream of visitors stopping by to congratulate Zacharias and Elisabeth and rejoice with them over their newborn son. Such rejoicing is a duty for believers. [Romans 12:15](#) says we are to "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." Bishop Ryle says, "How much more happiness there would be in this evil world, if conduct like that of Elisabeth's relations was more common! Sympathy in one another's joys and sorrows costs little, and yet is a grace of most mighty power. Like the oil on the wheels of some large engine, it may seem a trifling and unimportant thing, yet in reality it has an immense influence on the comfort and well-working of the whole machine of society."

Notice that this rejoicing by the relatives and neighbors was godly rejoicing. They rejoiced in "how the Lord had shown great mercy upon her." No one was talking about luck. The blessing was properly attributed to the mercy of God. Such rejoicing is healthy rejoicing.

It benefits the soul and it honors God. Today when good things happen, folk generally leave out God in the celebration but include a lot of booze and wild parties in it. In such cases the blessing becomes a blight. Better to not have the blessing if it is going to promote evil conduct.

B. THE DISPUTE ABOUT THE CHILD

A Jewish male was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, and at that time the newborn was also named (cp. [Luke 2:21](#)). Because these two acts were especially important to the Jews, it made that eighth day a very special day for the family. Because of the importance of the day, friends and relatives would often gather to commemorate the occasion. It was during this occasion that a dispute arose regarding the naming of John.

In considering this dispute over John's name, we will note the consensus name, the correct name, and the confirmed name.

1. The Consensus Name

Those gathered with Zacharias and Elisabeth on the occasion of John's circumcision seemed in unanimous agreement regarding what the new babe's name should be. "They called him Zacharias, after the name of his father" ([v. 59](#)). Over the years tradition had started naming the first son after his father. There is no Scriptural injunction to encourage this practice; it was simply a result of man's tradition; something which often grips people very firmly. Especially in those days was tradition revered. It was so popular and respected that the religious leaders often went so far as to make tradition more important than the Scripture. Christ is recorded in Scripture as dealing with the scribes and Pharisees about that problem ([Matthew 15:3](#)).

Zacharias was the wrong name for John, however; even though it was the name all the relatives and friends agreed was the name. But giving that name to John is typical of how poorly the world labels things. Many of God's servants and a lot of other good things have often been given the wrong names and labels by the world. When Divine revelation is ignored—as it was here by those who called John by the name of Zacharias—we will have great difficulty in labeling things correctly. Tradition, the popular trends and practices of the day, is no substitute for Divine revelation. Divine revelation is indispensable in the correct naming of things; tradition is not. Evil has trouble calling anything by its right name. It calls evil good and good evil. We see a lot of that today because folk ignore the Word of God.

2. The Correct Name

When the people began calling the new son, Zacharias, immediately Elisabeth "answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John" ([v. 60](#)). Elisabeth took a good stand in the faith here. She stood for Divine revelation. Though all stood against her, she remained steadfast in her conviction. She would not go along with her friends and relatives even though it was going against the popular practice of the day. She spoke up for truth and right.

We could use more of that kind in our day. But too often when the crowd takes a position, we go along with it because we are afraid to oppose the popular trends of the day.

Taking a stand does not stop opposition. When Elisabeth insisted the name was John and not Zacharias, the friends and relatives argued with her and said, “There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name” (v. 61). Every stand in the faith will be disputed by the flesh. And what does the flesh use to support their position? Nothing but man-made tradition, ideas, and reasonings. Elisabeth had something far better upon which she based her conviction. She had Divine revelation; she had the Word of God which had been conveyed to her through Zacharias who got it from the angel Gabriel who was God’s messenger. (Some believe Elisabeth knew about the name by special revelation to her personally. But God does not work miracles when they are unnecessary; and since Zacharias could easily tell her John’s name with his writing tablet [v. 63], that is the obvious way in which she would learn about his name.)

Always people will argue against our faith. Our faith will not be unchallenged. No doctrine, no conviction, no truth of our faith will be left unchallenged. Not only will skeptics dispute our faith; but sometimes, as here, our closest friends and relatives will also oppose us. That does not discredit our faith, however; and it should not silence the declaration of our faith, either. Let us be like Elisabeth and speak up for the truth no matter how outnumbered we may be.

3. The Confirmed Name

Elisabeth’s word was not good enough for the friends and relatives. So they appealed to Zacharias about the name of this miracle child. “They made signs [Zacharias was obviously deaf as well as dumb which we noted in the previous chapter] to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, His name is John” (vv. 62 63). The right name was confirmed. Elisabeth’s faith was confirmed. She was right even though she stood alone.

When these folks appealed to Zacharias, Elisabeth did not need to be concerned that her faith would be proven false. Faith will be confirmed when it is honestly and fairly investigated. We do not have to be afraid of research, archeology, inquiry, and examination. It is only unbelief that shuns these things. Faith is founded on the sure Word of God; and investigation will only confirm it, not contradict it.

The way Zacharias responded is significant. He said, “His name is John” (v. 63). He did not say his name shall be called John, or we have decided to call him John, or we are thinking about calling him John. No, the name had already been settled. His name “*is*” John. It was not open for discussion, for the choice had already been made by heaven. “The expression, *his name is*, points to a higher authority which has so determined it” (Godet). Zacharias made no mistake about what he believed the name to be. He knew the tradition of the day, and pride could have wanted a namesake in John. But that did not change his belief. He was firm, adamant, unswerving.

We need to state our beliefs with this kind of finality. We do not have to apologize for our faith, nor do we have to water down the declaring of our faith so it does not hurt the feelings of those who take a different position. It is only the devil who wants to quiet the declaration of faith. He does not like one to take a dogmatic position for truth, for it hurts his business. So preachers are told to tone it down in the pulpit—to not say, “His name is John”; but rather, “His name could be John, or perhaps it may be John, or we thought it was John but may be wrong.” This way you will not offend people—but, of course, neither will you declare Divine truth. Watering down the message only helps the devil. The truth needs to be declared with dogmatism, unashamedly, regardless of what others say or think.

C. THE DECLARATION ABOUT THE CHILD

When Zacharias confirmed with his writing tablet (a wax covered board) that the name for his son was John, “his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue was loosed, and he spoke, and praised God” ([v. 64](#)). What a good example of how to use our blessings. When God blesses us, we should use the blessing to honor Him. Zacharias’ blessing was restored speech, and he immediately used it to praise God. Oh, that we would do likewise with our blessings. But, instead, we are prone to use our blessings selfishly for our own pleasure and aggrandizement.

It was a great day for Zacharias when he could again speak. And when his mouth was opened, it no longer spoke in unbelief. Unbelief had shut his mouth. But faith opened it and also put a great message in his mouth. Unbelief needs to be silenced, for it has nothing good to say. But faith has great truths to declare.

The message faith put in Zacharias’ Divinely opened mouth is recorded for us by Luke. It is known as the “Benedictus,” one of those great songs recorded in the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel (the others are the “Beatitude” by Elisabeth, the “Magnificat” by Mary, the “Gloria” by the angelic host, and the “Nunc Dimittis” of the aged Simeon). We will not look here at the entire “Benedictus” but only at the specific part of the song which spoke about John the Baptist. This is found in verses [Luke 1:76](#) and [Luke 1:77](#). “And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins.” From this part of the “Benedictus,” we learn about the title of John and the task of John.

1. The Title of John

In every age, men have spent millions and gone to great efforts to gain earthly titles which they valued above even their character at times. As an example, we noted in the first chapter of this book how Herod connived to gain the coveted title of king of Judea. In the “Benedictus,” Zacharias said of John, “Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest” ([v. 76](#)). All the titles of the kingdom of this earth that men have sought after do not compare to “Prophet of the Highest.” It was a title given by heaven. It gave a position to John that exceeds in honor and worth any position this world can offer man.

Though the titles of heaven are the greatest, the world has little esteem for heavenly titles; and they generally do not have much esteem for those who possess heavenly titles, either. Position with God means nothing to the world. The world only sees position with man as important. It is a tragedy to be so mixed up in perspective and value regarding titles and positions; but when you sell out for the kingdoms of this world, you will lose your perspective where it counts the most.

John's title emphasizes the deity of Jesus Christ. "Prophet of the Highest" says John is a prophet of God, for "Highest" can be no other than God. Since we know that "Highest" refers here to Jesus Christ, there is, therefore, only one conclusion we can make here about Jesus Christ in regards to His deity. That conclusion is that Jesus Christ is indeed God.

2. The Task of John

John's primary task was to be the forerunner of Christ. This duty was stated by the angel Gabriel; and now Zacharias states it plainly in the "Benedictus" when he says of John, "Thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways" ([v. 76](#)). This task of John was spoken of in both Isaiah and Malachi. "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" ([Isaiah 40:3](#)); and "I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me" ([Malachi 3:1](#)).

The idea of preparing the way for someone comes from the ancient practice of heralds going before royalty, or other important people, and telling folk to prepare the way for the coming dignitary by clearing the roads and making them smooth and safe. Today, we see this principle practiced by the Secret Service who go before the president and prepare the routes he will travel on to make sure they are safe and secure. The Secret Service will even check manholes on the streets the caravan or parade involving the president or some other high government official will travel on. The way must be prepared for these officials. So likewise the way for the Lord must be prepared by John.

This preparation work of John was very vital for the Lord's ministry. It is summed up in "To give knowledge of salvation" ([v. 77](#)). Israel desperately needed this knowledge to correct a wrong expectation in that day. By and large, Israel expected and wanted a savior to deliver them politically. So, as an example, they interpreted all the prophecies of Christ to that end—the prophecies on suffering, they simply ignored or rejected. John's ministry was to show them their primary need was not political deliverance, but moral and spiritual deliverance. To show them this fact, he preached against their sins with great earnestness. When folk accepted this message, they would be very ready and eager for a redeemer in Jesus Christ.

Frederick Godet sums this all up very well when he says, "Why was the ministry of the Messiah preceded by that of another divine messenger. Because the very notion of salvation was falsified in Israel, and had to be corrected before salvation could be realized. A carnal and malignant patriotism had taken possession of the people and their rulers, and the idea of a political deliverance had been substituted for that of a moral salvation. If the notion

of salvation had not been restored to its scriptural purity before [the coming of] . . . the Messiah, not only would He have had to employ a large part of the time assigned to Him in accomplishing this indispensable task; but further, He would certainly have been accused of inventing a theory of salvation to suit His impotence [in their thinking] to effect any other [e.g. political deliverance]. There was needed, then, another person, divinely authorized, to remind the people that perdition consisted not in subjection to the Romans, but in divine condemnation; and that salvation, therefore, was not temporal emancipation, but the forgiveness of sin. To implant once more in the heart of the people this notion of salvation was indeed to prepare the way for Jesus, who was to accomplish this salvation, and no other . . . John the Baptist was to show to this people [Israel], who believed that all they needed was political restoration, that they were not less guilty than the heathen, and that they needed just as much divine pardon.”

Israel is not alone in needing their minds redirected from political and material to the spiritual deliverance. We have that problem not only in our secular society today but also in our churches—and that includes an alarming number of fundamentalist churches. The liberal apostate churches have for years been strong on political and material salvation. But in recent years, we have seen even many of the churches who are in conservative fundamentalist ranks get very active politically and socially. Many programs have been added in these fundamentalist churches that emphasize political and social goals. Patriotic services are very popular, as an example. But waving an American flag in a church service hardly relates to the Great Commission, nor will it save anyone where they need saving the most. Also, more and more fundamental churches are stressing voter registration—something only the apostate churches used to do because they had no other Gospel to preach except a social Gospel. We are not opposed to Christians being in government. But political action is not the message God gave the church!

The political and social emphasis is very popular, of course, because it does not convict of sin. You can be a very carnal person and not be upset about waving an American flag. But let a John the Baptist come into the pulpit and preach on your personal sins, and the attitude immediately changes. If John had preached a political salvation, he probably would have lasted a whole lot longer than he did in the ministry. This may be why a lot of preachers resort to the patriotic and political emphasis; for it promotes job security, something they seem to be more interested in than job fulfillment.

D. THE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE CHILD

The events occurring at the circumcision of John had a great effect upon the people who lived in the area where Zacharias and Elisabeth lived. “And fear came on all that dwelt round about them; and all these sayings [includes events, not just Zacharias’ prophecy] were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be!” ([vv. 65, 66](#)). The phrase “noised abroad” means “continuous talk back and forth between the people” (A. T.

Robertson). The coming of John the Baptist into the world caused much discussion among the people. When people saw one another, his birth and the circumstances associated with it were very prominent in their conversations. Three things can be said about these discussions about John: the exciter of the discussions, the extent of the discussions, and the effect of the discussions.

1. The Exciter of the Discussions

“And fear came on all that dwelt round about them” (v. 65) is what prompted all the talk about John. It was evident from all the things that surrounded the birth of John that there was something supernatural involved. This created a sobering “fear” of God in the hearts of the people which promoted much serious talk with one another.

It is commendable that the people recognized God was involved in these events, and that these events were not the ordinary. Today, people are so dull and dense spiritually that God could stand in front of them and do all kinds of awesome acts; yet they would never catch on. Everything is explained away in natural terms. Few ever ponder that God may be speaking. Tell them that venereal disease is Divine judgment for immorality, and they laugh and say it is nothing but a hygiene problem. Tell them AIDS is the anathema of God upon homosexual conduct, and they accuse you of homophobia. Tell them a drought is God’s judgment upon a wicked society, and they think you are a relic of the Dark Ages and have not learned that the caprice of the jet stream is why it rains or does not rain.

Some of this kind are in our churches, too; and do they ever cause trouble. A good man of God can be their minister and leading the church in God’s way, but they are so spiritually ignorant they do not recognize or respect the fact. As a result, they treat the man of God with disdain and oppose his work. The people acquainted with the birth of John the Baptist were of a different sort, however. They recognized God was in it all and acted accordingly. It was a noble and healthy response.

2. The Extent of the Discussions

“All these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea” (v. 65). Those days did not have radio and TV and newspapers and magazines to spread the word. It was just word of mouth. But things got spread around anyway, howbeit quite limited compared to our communications systems today.

Those living in the hill country of Judea were a privileged group to hear “these sayings.” They were recipients of great spiritual blessings. What they were experiencing exceeded all their other advantages and endowments, for spiritual light is the greatest privilege of all. No other people in the world were so richly blessed with spiritual privileges at that time as were those living in the hills of Judea.

We in our western world today have a situation similar to those in the hills of Judea in John’s day. Much of the world lies in heathen darkness while we, in contrast, bask in spiritual privileges unheard of in past generations. While many nations of the world have precious

little Christian literature, we abound with it on every hand. The same is true regarding churches, Gospel ministries on the air waves, and Christian schools and colleges. Our spiritual opportunities are many, but unfortunately we do not capitalize on them very well. We are poor stewards of them. Therefore, we walk in darkness when we could walk in great light. We will have to answer to God for our neglect of such valuable spiritual privileges.

3. The Effect of the Discussions

“And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be!” ([v. 66](#)). The news about the birth of John the Baptist and the events that were associated with it, such as, Zacharias’ great prophecy, the “Benedictus,” were not treated lightly and frivolously by these folk in the hills of Judea. They did not neglect their spiritual privileges and opportunities as so many do in our western world today, as we just noted above. But they “laid them up in their hearts” which shows the great respect and reverence they had for spiritual things. These things were important to them. They did not understand everything, but they did understand that these things were significant and needed to be treated that way.

Would that spiritual things were always treated with such respect and esteem. But disrespect is what usually greets spiritual things. Folk view the Word of God as quaint and unimportant. Nothing the Word says is taken to heart by much of the world. The Bible is laughed at, hell is joked about, God is mentioned only as a curse word, and religion is scorned and treated as a weakness. “Laid them up in their hearts,” however, is a much nobler and blessed way to respond to spiritual revelation.

E. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

Just a few brief sentences cover the development of this miracle child of Zacharias and Elisabeth. These sentences include the last sentence of verse [Luke 1:66](#) and all of verse [Luke 1:80](#). But though few and brief the sentences are, yet they carry a surprising amount of information. Much is said in them about John’s development. We divide this subject into two parts: the aid in the development and the areas of the development.

1. The Aid in the Development

“And the hand of the Lord was with him” ([v. 66](#)) tells us where the great help was in the development of John the Baptist. This help is absolutely essential if we are going to accomplish anything for God. “Without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5) expresses the principle succinctly. Any work we do for God must have the help of God to succeed. John the Baptist must from the very beginning of his life have Divine help. His task is too great to accomplish in human strength. His foes are too many and too strong to overcome by himself. His very birth required a miracle from God, but the miracle working of God was needed beyond his birth. This miracle work must go on in his protecting, training, enabling, and illuminating if he is going to fulfill his assignment.

“The hand of the Lord was with him” reminds us of what was said of Joseph of the Old Testament. Three times we read that God was with Joseph. “The LORD was with Joseph. . .his master saw that the LORD was with him. . . . But the LORD was with Joseph” ([Genesis 39:2,3,21](#)). This is the key to why Joseph was able to thrive in spite of his extremely trying circumstances. Though a slave and a prisoner, Joseph performed admirably for the glory of God because “the LORD was with Joseph.”

The world does not perceive the need of the hand of the Lord, however. They are more interested in the hand of man—particularly in handouts and in applause—than they are in the hand of God. The world prides itself in thinking it can operate in self-sufficiency without any need for Divine aid. But wise men know that, as we noted above, “without me ye can do nothing” ([John 15:5](#)). Let us, therefore, pray diligently for His help. Let us remember, as did the Psalmist, that, “My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth” ([Psalm 121:2](#)) and that we are extremely inadequate in ourselves to serve Him.

2. The Areas of Development

“And the child grew, and waxed [became] strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel” ([v. 80](#)). This verse covers three vital areas of the development of John. These areas are the physical, spiritual, and vocational areas of his life.

Physical development. “The child grew.” John must have grown into a fine physical specimen in order for him to endure his later living in the wilderness. We know from what the angel told Zacharias that John’s diet was disciplined. For one thing, he abstained from strong drink and abstaining from strong drink will always profit one’s health. Later on we will learn that his spartan diet consisted of wild honey and locusts ([Matthew 3:4](#)). John put his physical appetite in its right place.

While the physical is no substitute for the spiritual, the physical does often reflect one’s spiritual condition. Those who exercise little discipline in their eating habits indicate the appetites of the flesh are too prominent in their life; and, hence, the spiritual will suffer. A fat, overweight Christian chowing down greedily at every meal needs to go to the mourners’ bench and get things right with God. Today, in our health-conscious age, it looks especially bad for a Christian to have undisciplined eating habits. Lack of good disciplined eating habits is evidence of some serious spiritual problems.

Spiritual development. “Became strong in spirit” speaks of his spiritual growth. Many children grow healthy and robust physically, but spiritually they are so sickly. Not so John the Baptist. His spiritual growth kept pace with his physical growth.

Spiritual growth is not an accident. Especially will parents have to be involved if a child is going to have good spiritual training in his early years. It is, in fact, a great responsibility and also a great privilege for parents to teach and train their little ones in the things of God. But few do. They pass it off on to the Sunday School or Christian day school. However, the Sunday School and Christian day school, as good as they may be, will never make up for

lack of home training. Christian parents who train their children are much more important than these institutions. We can survive without Sunday School and Christian day schools a lot easier than we can survive without Christian parents. And our churches certainly attest to this fact, for in spite of all the Sunday Schools and Christian day schools, our churches keep degenerating because the home is degenerating.

Vocational development. “Was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel” speaks of his training for his calling. John’s living in the desert had a great deal to do with his preparation for his calling of being the herald of Christ. It afforded him the opportunity to be alone with God and become strengthened in the inner man so when he came into the public light he had something to say worth listening to.

We will not serve God well if we have not learned the practice of being alone with God. Running with the crowd does not help the soul ready itself for Divine service. The Bible has a number of illustrations of the great saints of olden days who had their times of solitude and aloneness. Moses spent many years in the desert, Elijah camped privately for a time at Cherith, Paul had his time alone in Arabia, three times a day Daniel took time out from his work to get alone with God, and Christ also sought those times when He would get away from the crowds and be absolutely alone with God in some quiet place. We need these times of solitude to get our bearings, to get perspective, to hear the “still small voice” directing us.

John the Baptist did not come out of the desert until “the day of his showing,” and it was a good thing. God determines the “day of showing,” and that day did not come until John had spent much time alone with God and was ready to serve. Too often we want to have our “showing” in public without the time of preparation in private. Many pulpits evidence this by their barrenness of good spiritual food. The preacher sort of filibusters for a sermon, for there is precious little substance. You can tell by listening that he put his sermon together in a hurry with little preparation. Such men need to look at John the Baptist. They need to get alone with God. They should quit attending a lot of meetings, stop their running around, and spend more time alone with God and in His Word. Then they would have something to say on Sunday. John the Baptist certainly had something to say when he began preaching. But that did not happen until he had spent a good deal of time alone in the deserts with God.

IV. BEGINNINGS

[MATTHEW 3:1-6](#); [MARK 1:2-6](#); [LUKE 3:1-6](#); [JOHN 1:6](#)

THE PUBLIC MINISTRY of John the Baptist was a great ministry but not a very long one. Scholars estimate the duration of his public ministry from as short as six months to not

much more than a year at the most. Then he was arrested and put in jail—not a very good reception for one of God’s greatest preachers. But that is often representative of how the truly great men of God are treated by the world. Their ministries are generally unappreciated and scorned though their ministries are in truth of tremendous value to the world and could, therefore, really help the world if they were only accepted. What a great and blessed day it would have been for Israel had they universally and sincerely heeded John the Baptist.

In this chapter we want to look at the beginning of John’s great but short ministry. We will look at the early days of his work in which his sudden and dramatic appearance and preaching “was as though a spark had fallen on dry tinder” (F. B. Meyer). In viewing the early days of John’s ministry, we will note the mandate activating the ministry, the man assigned the ministry, the message accompanying the ministry, and the multitudes attending the ministry.

A. THE MANDATE ACTIVATING THE MINISTRY

The public ministry of John the Baptist began when he was given a direct communiqué from the Lord. In examining this mandate which started him on his way as the herald of Jesus Christ, we will note the age when the mandate was given, the author of the mandate, and the anticipation for the mandate.

1. The Age When the Mandate Was Given

Both Matthew and Luke tell us the time when the mandate was given to John to begin his public ministry. But Matthew is not as descriptive as Luke. Matthew only says “In those days” ([Matthew 3:1](#)). Luke, however, spells it out in great detail. He says, “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness” ([Luke 3:1,2](#)). Luke cites no less than seven persons—five political rulers and two religious rulers—to indicate when John’s public ministry began. In those days folk did not have the dating system we have to establish a time. They recorded dates by those in prominent political and religious offices. Therefore, here it was Tiberius Caesar, Pilate, Herod (Antipas, son of Herod the Great via Malthace), Philip (son of Herod the Great via Cleopatra), Lysanias, Annas (a former high priest who had been deposed by Rome but still had the title and considerable clout in Jewish religious circles), and Caiaphas (the present high priest who was a son-in-law to Annas).

The names of the political and religious leaders given by Luke, besides plainly establishing the time when John began his ministry, show us three important truths: the fidelity of the Scriptures, the foulness of society (this shows the need for John’s ministry), and the favored of the Sovereign.

The fidelity of the Scriptures. Luke has so many men and their offices listed here as serving at the same time that it is easy to check his writing to see if he was correct or not. The Bible is ever this way. When it is checked, it will be discovered that the Word of God is always accurate. Its statements will always be found to be true. You can trust the Bible as no other book. Albert Barnes said, “An impostor does not mention names, and times, and places particularly. If he did, it would be easy to ascertain that he was an impostor. But the sacred writers describe objects and men as they were perfectly familiar with them. They never appear to be guarding themselves. They speak of things most minutely. If, therefore, they had been impostors, it would have been easy to detect them.”

The foulness of society. This list reveals and emphasizes how corrupt society was when John began his ministry. Not one of the five rulers listed is known for anything but evil. Immoral, bloody, cruel, ambitious, and vain, they oppressed the people unmercifully. And the priesthood, as we noted in our first chapter, was obviously in bad shape, too; for two high priests are listed. The high priest was to be a lifetime position determined by his relationship to Aaron. But it was at that time a political tool of the Roman rulers. They appointed whom they wished and deposed whom they wished. This would not help the character of the priesthood, for there would be a lot of fawning to the corrupt political rulers by the priests to keep their religious position.

With all this foulness in the land, it was time for a John the Baptist to cry out against the sins of the day. Sin was the problem then as it is now. The rulers and other celebrities of society would talk about improving the economy, about national security, about jobs and education and health as they do today. But the number one problem was a sin problem; and until it was dealt with properly, all the other problems would continue to vex society.

The favored of the Sovereign. When we compare this list with John the Baptist who received the communiqué from God, we quickly learn who the Sovereign God favors. Not one of those men listed in the list of important world leaders at that time was given the Word of God. But Luke says, “the word of God came unto John . . . in the wilderness” ([Luke 3:2](#)) not to the leaders of the world systems in their palaces and temples. God does not honor one according to his position in the world. He honors one according to his relationship with Him. Therefore, a back number (according to the world’s esteem) who is dwelling in obscurity in the wilderness will hear from God; but those in the prestigious and conspicuous places of political and religious leadership in the land will be passed over.

This truth should encourage a great many of God’s people. Most saints are not celebrities but are generally obscure, little known people. Today celebrity status is so esteemed, even in the church, that most saints think they cannot expect much from God because they have little status in society. Society does not honor them; so they suspect God will not honor them either. But not so—God honors men according to the condition of their heart, not according to their circumstances in the world. Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias,

Annas, and Caiaphas, though famous and in positions of earthly prestige and power, were nothing in God's sight. John the Baptist, at that time nothing in the world's eyes, was, however, very special in God's sight because he was right with God.

2. The Author of the Mandate

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" ([John 1:6](#)) and "the word of God came unto John" ([Luke 3:2](#)) declare plainly that John's mandate came from God Himself. Since it came from God, John's orders would carry much weight, evidence wisdom, and be in accordance with the Word.

The orders carried much weight. No orders carry as much weight in terms of authority as God's orders do. Therefore, these orders had priority over all other orders. John's number one responsibility was to drop everything else he was doing and commence fulfilling what God wanted him to do. John did just that. John's whole ministry reflected his submission to Divine orders over any other orders.

Giving supreme priority to God's commands, His will, and His calling has always been a problem with men. Few men do it well. The prophet Jonah demonstrated the problem rather pronouncedly. Like Jonah, most folk will do what God orders them to do providing it does not cross their own interests. When it does, then God's orders are given a lesser priority than they should have. Many casualties occur in Christian service because the called ones do not give the priority to their Divine calling which they should give to it. In day-today experiences, they repeatedly show preference for their own interests and plans over God's calling.

The orders evidence wisdom. God's orders will always evidence wisdom. Christ was about to reveal Himself, and He needed a herald to prepare the people for His coming. John's orders came to fill this need at just the proper time.

It is the habit of God to send the right man to the right place at the right time with the right ministry. Pastors and churches seeking to do the will of God will find this true. God will bring to the church the man who has the skills and abilities to fit the need of that church. Of course, sometimes when the right man becomes pastor of a church, the church, like many folk in John's day, does not respond well to the man's ministry though it is exactly what they need. So the church misses out on much blessing. And then to add to their folly, they often blame their troubles on the pastor they would not follow.

The orders were in accordance with the Word. It was the "Word of God" ([Luke 3:2](#)) which came to John and ordered his ministry. His orders were, therefore, in accordance with what the Word of God said. No calling from God will be contrary to the Word of God. You can mark that down as certain.

One area where we need to emphasize this truth more today is in the matter of women in the ministry. God does not call women to the public ministry of preaching the Word of

God. The type of ministry John the Baptist had is never given to a woman. “There was a *man* sent from God” ([John 1:6](#)) to do the preaching, not a woman. Men are called of God to the position of public spiritual leadership. This is taught plainly throughout the Scripture. But today, the women’s movement is so popular that even our fundamental churches are getting into the act, and more and more are pushing women to the front. However, women teaching mixed adult Sunday School classes, women directing choirs and leading congregational singing, women having a lot to say in church business meetings, women sitting on church boards, women filling in some of the slots in Bible conferences, and even girl usherettes at youth rallies all violate the principle of male leadership as stated in the Scripture.

Long ago modernistic churches went hook, line, and sinker for the women’s lib movement and, as a result, now have a number of women pastoring their churches. In fact, that situation is at present rather common and not the exception. But this is all contrary to Scripture. The Bible still says, “Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law” ([1 Corinthians 14:34](#)); and “I suffer [permit] not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man [which she does by preaching and teaching men], but to be in silence” ([1 Timothy 2:12](#)). There was a “man”—not a woman—sent from God to herald Jesus Christ. All of this does not make a woman an inferior person, of course. It simply emphasizes what her position is not. She has plenty she can do, and much which a man is not gifted to do. Therefore, let both men and women carefully check the Word of God to be sure their position and service is in accordance with the Word.

3. The Anticipation for the Mandate

When reporting the beginning of John’s ministry, all three Synoptic Gospels quote Old Testament Scripture to show that John’s ministry, which began with the mandate from God, was a fulfillment of prophecy. Each Synoptic Gospel quoted from [Isaiah 40](#), and Mark also quotes from [Malachi 3](#). Such quoting of the prophets informs us that John’s ministry was not unexpected. It was anticipated hundreds of years before he was born. Isaiah, writing seven hundred years before John, prophesied of him as “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” ([Matthew 3:3](#), cp. [Isaiah 40:3](#)). Malachi, writing four hundred years before John, prophesied of John in “I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee” ([Mark 1:2](#), cp. [Malachi 3:1](#)). Both prophets described John as the herald who went before royalty to urge the people to prepare the roads for the coming celebrity. In our last chapter, we noted in detail this practice of a herald as recorded in these Old Testament texts.

The prediction of John’s ministry many years in advance of the event reminds us that it is the gracious practice of God to give mankind ample notice of coming spiritual events so that they will have time to prepare and be ready for the event. No man will be able to accuse God of allowing events to overtake him unexpectedly because he was not given ample instruction regarding the event. Many will, of course, experience unexpected judgment because they

did not heed God’s warnings. But no one can blame God for the unexpected nature of the experience. When John the Baptist came on the scene, his coming should not have been a surprise and puzzle to any Israelite; for the Word of God had given adequate information concerning the event. They, therefore, should have readily received John and the One he heralded.

B. THE MAN ASSIGNED THE MINISTRY

When Scripture records the beginning of John’s ministry, it tells us some things about John which reveal his stellar character. It shows us John’s humility in his waiting for the call, and it shows us his hardiness in where he dwelt, how he dressed, and what his diet was.

1. His Humility

When the mandate came to John to begin his public ministry, it came to a humble man. His humility is seen in his waiting in private for the call and in his waiting in patience for the call.

Waiting in private. The “word of God came unto John . . . in the wilderness” ([Luke 3:2](#)) to instruct him to commence his ministry of being the herald for Christ. In our last chapter we noted that Luke said John “was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel” ([Luke 1:80](#)). For a number of years (probably at least ten—some believe he entered the desert when he was twenty when he would ordinarily have gone into the priesthood) before he began his public ministry, John abode in obscurity and away from the public eye. This reflected great humility on the part of John, for John knew what his ministry was going to be and what an important position he would have in being the forerunner of Christ. He could not help but know this; for Zacharias, his father, would have instructed him in detail concerning what the angel said about John and about his calling; and Zacharias would also have instructed John about what he, Zacharias, had spoken under the influence of the Holy Spirit in the “Benedictus” concerning John. These great truths concerning John’s call could easily promote pride in a lesser person. But John the Baptist received all of this with great humility. Though he knew his great destiny as the herald of Christ, he did not push himself forward upon the people until God gave the command. He did not exalt himself by letting everyone know who he was and what an important job was going to be his. In a great demonstration of humility, he stayed obscure and secluded in the wilderness until the call came to go public. How very commendable.

John’s humility regarding his calling is a rebuke to the attitude which dominates man so much of the time. Men even think that they must push themselves into the limelight. They think that if they are somebody they must let everybody know they are somebody so that they get treated liked somebody. After all, their arrogance reasons, what a shame if they are not treated according to the rank they think they have. This attitude is not only typical of the world, but unfortunately, we see a good bit of it in the ministry, too. There are a number of

ministers who like for everyone to know that they are a minister, not so they can minister to the people, but so they can receive the revering of men. John was just the opposite. He was guided by the spirit of humility, not pride.

Waiting in patience. It was extremely important that John not move until he had received a mandate. Timing was very important in a twofold way. First, it was important regarding the *presence of Christ*. If John had started before the call came, he would have been announcing the coming of Christ without Christ being on His way as yet. That would have disgraced Christ and made a fool of John. Second, it was important regarding the *preparation of John*. John needed to wait patiently in the desert so he could be adequately prepared for his service. Living in the desert was not a do-nothing time. It was a time of preparation for his calling. Physically and spiritually he needed preparation, as we noted in the last chapter. Preparation often tests our patience. In this case, patience and humility are generally inseparable; for pride often thinks it is ready, prepared, and qualified for some prominent post of service when, in fact, it is instead a long ways from being ready to assume the position. Jumping into the work before one is adequately prepared will make a mess of things in a hurry.

Humility will help us wait patiently for God's call. Humility will help us make sure we have God's orders before we move. Of course, we also need to make sure we move when we get God's orders. It is bad enough to run ahead in this business, but it is just as bad to lag behind.

2. His Hardiness

John the Baptist was no effeminate weakling who required luxury and the pampering of his fleshly appetites to keep him happy. Rather John was like Paul who said, "I keep under [discipline by buffeting] my body, and bring it into subjection" ([1 Corinthians 9:27](#)). John was a disciplined, hardy soul, who put the flesh in its place in order to promote the health of the spirit. Three things said about John at the beginning of his ministry show us this fact. These three things concerned his dwelling, his dress, and his diet.

His dwelling. As we have already noted, God's call came to John when he was living in the desert wilderness of Judea. "The word of God came unto John . . . in the wilderness [called 'the deserts' in [Luke 1:80](#)]" ([Luke 3:2](#)). The area spoke of here was "that desolate waste country south of Jericho and along the shores of the Dead Sea" (Spence). A. T. Robertson describes the area as "the rough region in the hills toward the Jordan and the Dead Sea . . . Here John came in close touch with the rocks, the trees . . . the snakes that slipped before the burning grass over the rocks." The area was not totally without vegetation as some flocks and shepherds scoured the area for what few bits of grass and other vegetation was there. But for the most part, it was a rugged, barren wasteland hostile to man and beast alike.

Desert living is hard living. It is not easy street. Things would be very spartan in the desert. One who must have everything will not survive there. The desert will test the character of one's faith. Weak faith will complain to God of the poor living conditions there;

and that if God expects them to serve Him, He will have to treat them better. So the desert reveals whether one can go without the comforts and conveniences of life and still be ready and willing to serve God. John could, but not many can today. Any spartan living forced on Christians today generally reveals a sickly, selfish, fleshly-pampered soul. But desert experiences are needed, for the desert keeps one from getting spoiled and from becoming soft and hence unfit for battle. Spartan living is not the detriment to Christian service that affluent living is, that's for sure.

His dress. Both Matthew and Mark note John's dress. "And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin [leather belt] about his loins [waist]" ([Mark 1:6](#); cp. [Matthew 3:4](#)). The camel's hair here was "the long shaggy hair of the camel, from which a coarse cheap cloth is made, still worn by the poorer classes in the East" (Barnes). The leather belt is "seen around the body of the common laborer" (Ibid.).

John's apparel sent several messages (our dress always sends messages—sometimes good messages, sometimes bad messages—depending on the style of dress). One message his dress sent was that he was a prophet. This plain style of dress was typical of the prophet of God ([Zechariah 13:4](#)), and it especially spoke of his prototype Elijah ([2 Kings 1:8](#)). So his dress fit his calling. Another message his dress sent was one of rebuke to the religious leaders of the day who were addicted to finery, and who in pride dressed sumptuously and ostentatiously to impress the people. John's dress, of course, does not instruct preachers to dress slovenly in tattered overalls and flannel shirts. Rather, it admonishes preachers to not be given to large and expensive wardrobes and to not appear in the pulpit in flashy attire which reflects the glamour and glitz of show-time instead of the seriousness and spirituality of the message they are to proclaim.

His diet. Both Matthew and Mark also record John's diet while he lived in the desert. "His meat [food] was locusts and wild honey" ([Matthew 3:4](#); cp. [Mark 1:6](#)). Locusts were permitted to be eaten by the Israelites ([Leviticus 11:22](#)). While locusts may not be at all appetizing to the western palate, they are still eaten in the east. They are considered, however, an inferior food and thus the food of the poor. The honey spoken of here was the honey which was made by the wild bees that abounded in Israel. Locust and honey would not make John overweight. His was a spartan diet to be sure. His diet would provide adequate nourishment, but that was about all. Its value was that it promoted a disciplined, sacrificial attitude which put the appetites of the flesh in their proper place and did not exalt them to the prominent place they generally exist today in most people. Spiritual service will indeed suffer where fleshly appetites are not disciplined faithfully.

The hardiness of John's lifestyle reflected a priority on the spiritual in his life. It said spiritual things were more important than the fleshly trappings of the world. His dwelling, dress, and diet spoke of contempt for the dainties and delicate things which weaker souls must have in abundance and cannot get along without. It indicated that the coming kingdom

of Christ was not one of materialism but one in which repentance and a forsaking of the things of the world would play a big part. Such hardiness is not favored by many professing Christians in the materialistic society of our land today. Rather it is the gospel of prosperity which is the popular message with man today. It is much preferred to John's lifestyle and message. But it does not produce eternal fruit like John and his message does.

C. THE MESSAGE ACCOMPANYING THE MINISTRY

The public ministry of John the Baptist began with preaching. "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea" ([Matthew 3:1](#)). God had given John a message to give to the people, and we will consider here the particulars of the message and the proclamation of the message.

1. The Particulars of the Message

The message of John the Baptist is summed up in "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" ([Matthew 3:2](#)). This was the same message which Christ would later preach ([Matthew 4:17](#)). We note here the theme of the message, the reason for the message, the warning in the message, and the surprise about the message.

The theme of the message. The theme is obvious; it is repentance. All the Synoptic Gospels emphasize this repentance theme in John's ministry. Matthew simply says "Repent ye"; Mark says, "John did . . . preach the baptism of repentance" ([Mark 1:4](#)); and Luke speaks of John "preaching the baptism of repentance" ([Luke 3:3](#)). To see better this theme in John's message, we will look at the meaning of the theme, the indictment in the theme, and the appropriateness of the theme.

First, the *meaning* of the theme. The meaning of repent here is to change. It is more than just being sorry for one's sin; the emphasis is to change one's attitude about one's sin and to forsake one's sin. Many in every age like to limit repentance to just feeling sorry for one's sin. They do not like the idea of an all-out forsaking of sin. They want the benefits of repentance but not the responsibilities of it. In our next chapter we will see John confronting some who viewed repentance in this unacceptable way.

Second, the *indictment* in the theme. The message of repentance said plainly that Israel was living in sin. This was not the thought of many Israelites, especially the religious leaders who prided themselves as being especially holy because they kept their religious rituals punctiliously. But John's message of repentance exposed that disgusting white-washed religion as worthless and called for the people to deal properly with their evil conduct by repenting of it.

Third, the *appropriateness* of the theme. The message of repentance is always the right message to prepare people for Jesus Christ. "It is useless to preach the gospel of the grace of God to men who have no realization of their need of that grace" (Harry Ironside). The

message of repentance tells the people they have sinned and need to change their ways. When a man comes to the true realization and consciousness of this condition in his life, he will then be able to see his great need of Christ and will be ready to cast himself upon Him as the One Who can cleanse away his sins and make the change real and eternal within his soul.

The reason for the message. John the Baptist gave his listeners a very good reason for them to repent. The reason was “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” If they want in this great and wondrous kingdom, they need to repent of their sins.

Many get hung up in technicalities about the term “kingdom of heaven” used in Matthew and “kingdom of God” used in the other Gospels and miss the basic and important truths the phrase “kingdom of heaven” teaches. Basically it teaches that there is a kingdom of another source, composition, and character than the kingdoms of this world—a truth which ought to be welcomed to those weary of the kingdoms of this world. Being of heaven, it will involve more than the flesh and material. It will involve the soul and eternity. The Sovereign will not be man but God, namely, Jesus Christ Whom John is heralding. To be part of this kingdom is a choice blessing indeed. But since the kingdom is heavenly in character, it is also holy in character which means you cannot enter the kingdom apart from holiness. Thus the need to repent of one’s sin.

The warning in the message. “At hand” speaks volumes regarding the importance of repenting now. It makes the command to “repent” an urgent command, one that requires our fullest attention. It warns against delay in repenting, for “at hand” speaks of opportunity; and opportunity does not stay with us forever. How true that was with the ministry of John the Baptist; for he had a short, very short public ministry. Listen to him now and heed him now, for you will not have many more chances to hear him. The same was true with Jesus Christ. Three to three and a half years was the limit of His public ministry on earth. But most folk had much less time than that to take advantages of His ministry, for those few years of Christ’s ministry were spent in various parts of the country which meant the only time folk had to avail themselves of great spiritual opportunity was the short time He was in their area. How this should prompt us to be better stewards of our spiritual opportunities.

The surprise about the message. Most Israelites anticipated a different message. No, they were not surprised at the kingdom part of the message. They anticipated and were interested in the “kingdom,” for they were looking for the Messiah to come to restore Israel to its former glory among the nations. It was the repentance part of the message which they did not expect nor like. They wanted a prince who would rebuke their oppressors, not a prophet who would rebuke their iniquities. They wanted to conquer people, not passions. They wanted position, not purity. Their idea of a kingdom was solely one of this earth. Instead of a message telling them to repent, they expected and would have preferred a message telling them to take up arms to revolt. That would have appealed to the flesh. But the kingdom of

God starts with the condition of the soul. It speaks to the Spirit, not the flesh. It will indeed eventually involve an earthly rule and glory for those in the kingdom. But holiness is the character of the kingdom, and that is where the emphasis was in John's kingdom message of repentance. And it was that emphasis that was not anticipated by the host of Israelites.

2. The Proclamation of the Message

Two important things can be noted from Scripture about the proclamation of this message by John the Baptist. First, we note the method of proclamation; and second, we note the place of the proclamation.

The method of proclamation. The method used to proclaim this great message was "preaching" ([Matthew 3:1](#)). The word translated preaching here means to cry out, to herald. This is not dialogue or discussion. It is a declaration of an important truth in a dogmatic, earnest, forceful way. The voice is lifted up so the message is proclaimed loudly and clearly. When this type of proclamation is finished, the listener will not have any doubt as to what has been said.

We need more of this kind of speaking from our pulpits today, for we have too much sound coming from the pulpit that is a muffled and an uncertain sound. It is a sound which mumbles the message, takes away the earnestness of it, blunts the edge of the sword of the Word of God, and leaves people in the dark. Strong declaration of Divine truth has given way to discussion groups (where people pool their spiritual ignorance), symposiums, seminars, and what all. Nothing is ever too certain, and dogmatism is forbidden and looked upon as unscholarly and uncharitable in these situations. But such practices and attitudes dishonor the Word and keep people from learning the Word well. It promotes darkness, not light. If we are going to honor the Word and open it up to the people in our churches, we are going to have to get back to declaring it as John did.

The place of the proclamation. John did his preaching "in the wilderness of Judea" ([Matthew 3:1](#)). He did not do his preaching in the big Temple in Jerusalem or in important synagogues throughout Israel. The kind of preaching John did would not be permitted in the high religious places of his day. Great preaching is not readily received by mankind in any age. As an example, the prophet Amos was told by the politically favored priest Amaziah, "Go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there; But prophesy not again any more at Bethel; for it is the king's chapel, and it is the king's court" ([Amos 7:12,13](#)). Embrace God's message and dare to proclaim it as John the Baptist did, and few will be the open doors where you will be allowed to preach. Most of the doors will be shut quickly in your face. The stronger your convictions regarding godly living, the less will be the pulpits open to your preaching. You can be strong about denominational things and be welcomed in many places. Get strong in holiness, however, and you will be unwanted by most. But do not feel distressed and forsaken. John the Baptist had to do his preaching in the deserts, in the open air. He received no invitations from prestigious religious centers

to hold meetings in their temples and places of assembly. And neither have many other great preachers down through the centuries. Many choice men of God have been forced to preach in the fields, in out-of-the-way places, and in lowly assemblies because the organized churches of the land shut them out. But we know what these rejected preachers preached; we know what a great message they proclaimed. However, those who preached in the prestigious churches and assemblies and were the toast of the leaders of the land have left us no message and no ministry worth remembering.

D. THE MULTITUDES ATTENDING THE MINISTRY

Though relegated to the wilderness to exercise his ministry, John the Baptist still had an audience. We will look here at the size of his audience and the sentiment of his audience.

1. The Size of His Audience

John had good-sized crowds at the beginning of his ministry. “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan” ([Matthew 3:5](#)). This takes in the area of southern Palestine. “All,” as the context will confirm, does not mean every single inhabitant of the area; but it is a term used to describe a great multitude of people from these parts. John’s ministry was not done in a corner. It had plenty of attention at the beginning. People thronged to him from all over the area.

But though John’s crowds would be large in size for an audience for a speaker, it still must be noted that John’s ministry was limited to a small section of the world. This made that area a privileged area of the world as we have noted in previous chapters. Outside of Jesus Christ, there was not another person in the entire world which needed to be listened to more than John the Baptist. Orators may have abounded in the Roman Empire and other parts of the world, but it was John the Baptist who was the man who had something worthwhile to say. Great, therefore, was the privilege of those folk in southern Palestine; for they had access to the ministry of John the Baptist. All the speakers of the world combined were nothing compared to John.

2. The Sentiment of His Audience

The best we can say about the sentiment of the crowd is that it was fickle. They appeared to be earnest, sincere, and enthused about John’s ministry. But in the long run they were not.

At first the crowd really appeared to be a good crowd at heart. They were a seeking crowd at the beginning, for the Scripture indicates that the crowd went out to John the Baptist. John did not go into the cities and seek a crowd, but they “went out to him” ([Matthew 3:5](#)). This is commendable. They put forth the effort to hear John. They went out into the wilderness to listen to him. They did not go to some fine cathedral with padded pews and air conditioning. They journeyed to the harsh wilderness and sat out in the open to

listen to this firebrand from the desert proclaim Divine truth.

Furthermore, a good many of them were baptized. This was the baptism of repentance which meant they were publicly acknowledging they needed to repent of their sins. This certainly would cause one to suspect they really meant business. Attending the service said something, but being baptized would seem to really confirm their sincerity.

But the truth of the matter is, the crowd was not very sincere. They soon left John. True, some left John because he sent them to Christ. That was the goal and aim of his ministry. But that is not why a host of them left John. Most listeners left John because their interest span in spiritual things was short or because the truth was too hot for them. Proof of their insincerity is that when Jesus Christ came on the scene, Jerusalem and Judea (the areas where John the Baptist ministered) gave Christ the worst reception He had in Palestine. The very people who had more spiritual advantage than anyone else in the land were the ones who gave Christ the coolest reception. This, of course, did not reflect negatively upon work of John the Baptist as the herald of Christ. It only revealed what wicked characters the rejectors were.

Today this kind fills our churches. At times they appear to put out great effort to be in the services which causes us to think they are earnest. They make a profession of faith and are baptized. They seem excited and real. But it does not last. Soon they either leave because of disinterest, or because they get upset at the truth. Unfortunately, when this happens, many church members think the problem is the pastor, and so they fire him and get another man. Because a different pastor is a new face and may have some different ways, the rejectors show up again and seem enthused. But eventually the newness and excitement wears off, and the rejectors again reveal their true character and leave again. So let us learn here to not be so naïve why many people leave the church. They may claim a lot of reasons, but the root of the matter lies in their lack of genuineness in the faith. Like the followers of John the Baptist, they look good for a while; but their profession is only outward. It is only religious make-up smeared on in a show of interest which often beguiles the unwary.

V. BAPTIZING

[MATTHEW 3:6-17](#); [LUKE 3:7-14](#)

SHORTLY AFTER HIS public ministry began, John commenced baptizing. This baptizing was such a conspicuous feature of John's ministry that he became known as the baptizer—hence the name John the Baptist. Some think the name indicates that John was the founder of the Baptist denomination. But that is not so. It was not until the third century at the earliest (according to J. M. Carroll) that any Christian group was called by a Baptist name. “Anabaptist” was the first designation given people with the Baptist name involved. This name

was given to those who opposed infant baptism and espoused only believer's baptism. The term "Ana-baptist" means to be baptized again. That is, if you had been baptized as an infant, you needed to be baptized again if you were now a believer; for the infant baptism was invalid. As the centuries passed, the name was shortened from "Ana-baptist" to simply "Baptist." It had nothing to do with John the Baptist. His name came about because he did so much baptizing, not because he was the founding father of the Baptists.

Because John did so much baptizing and is known as John the Baptist, we feel it wise to take one entire chapter to examine his baptizing. In this chapter, we will consider the two different baptisms John was involved with: the baptizing of the crowd and the baptizing of the Christ. There are three water baptisms in the New Testament: the baptism of the repenter, the baptism of the Redeemer, and the baptism of the redeemed. John was involved in the baptism of the repenter and in the baptism of the Redeemer, but not in the baptism of the redeemed.

A. THE BAPTIZING OF THE CROWD

John's ministry involved baptizing a great crowd of people. To examine this baptizing by John, we will note the mandate for this baptizing, the meaning of this baptizing, the mode in this baptizing, and the message at this baptizing.

1. The Mandate for This Baptizing

Just as John received a mandate from God to begin his ministry, which we noted in our last chapter, so John received a mandate from God to baptize. "He [God] . . . sent me to baptize with water" ([John 1:33](#)). These orders for the ministry of John the Baptist were doubtless all combined together; that is, he did not get an order to start preaching and then later on an order to baptize. His orders to begin his ministry would include the entire work of preaching and baptizing, for they were inseparably associated together. This is seen in the fact that when he came on the scene he came "preaching the baptism of repentance" ([Luke 3:3](#)).

Surprisingly, a number of writers do not think John the Baptist got his idea of baptism from God. Some seem puzzled as to where John got the idea for baptizing. Others think he may have gotten it from some religious sect, such as the Essenes (a hermit group which like John dwelt in the wilderness) or the Mandeans. But these ideas lack credibility because there is no record of John having contact with the Essenes, and the Mandeans came on the scene long after John's time. A number of writers think John may have gotten it from Jewish practices—either from the purification ceremonies of the law or from the Jewish practice of baptizing Gentile proselytes. That is not a satisfactory explanation either, for John's method of baptism had no precedent in Jewish law, and baptizing proselytes did not occur until some time after the fall of Jerusalem. Godet says, "The rite of baptism, which consisted in the plunging of the body more or less completely into water, was not at this period in use among the Jews, neither for the Jews themselves, for whom the law only prescribed lustrations

[ceremonial cleansings or washings], nor for proselytes from paganism, to whom according to the testimony of history, baptism was not applied until after the fall of Jerusalem.”

All of this ignorance and guesswork about where John the Baptist got the orders, the idea, and the inspiration to baptize is inexcusable; for, as we noted, the Word of God makes it clear that he got his baptismal ministry straight from God Himself. John the Baptist was a prophet and guided his ministry by the direct communiqués from God just as other prophets did. But some folk must have humanistic explanations for everything which explains why Divine revelation is often left out as the source of John’s baptism. But Divine revelation is the only satisfactory explanation for the source of John’s baptizing. As F. B. Meyer says, “John the Baptist . . . cannot be accounted for by any of the pre-existing conditions of his time . . . It is enough for us to remember that he was sent to baptize; that the idea of his baptism was ‘from heaven.’”

2. The Meaning of This Baptizing

John’s baptizing of the crowds was connected with repentance, for Scripture says it was the “baptism of repentance” ([Luke 3:3](#)). This meant that when folk were baptized by John the Baptist, it was a public declaration of their repentance. “His baptism was the recognition on the part of the people that they were sinners and deserved to die. As they went down into the waters of baptism they were saying as it were, ‘We ought to die for our sins’” (Ironsides).

The meaning of John’s baptism is different than the meaning of baptism for the believer today. Believers’ baptism is the identification of the believer with Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. It is a public declaration that Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection is that upon which the baptized one is basing their salvation. John’s baptism was acknowledgement of one’s sin; believers’ baptism is the acknowledgement of one’s salvation. John’s baptism involved the confession of sin ([Matthew 3:6](#)); believer’s baptism involves the confession of Christ ([Acts 8:36,37](#)).

The difference in the meaning of John’s baptizing of the crowds and of believers’ baptism is emphasized in the book of Acts in the experiences of Apollos and Paul at Ephesus. When Apollos, the eloquent evangelist from Alexandria, came to Ephesus to minister, the Scripture says he was “instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, [but] knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue; whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” ([Acts 18:25,26](#)). After Calvary and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the baptism of John was no longer applicable. Baptism had a new meaning; it was no longer a testimony of repentance but a testimony of one’s redemption through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Apollos needed to be instructed “more perfectly” (more accurately, more completely) regarding these truths. After he spoke in the synagogue at Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla, two knowledgeable and noble believers, took him aside and did this instructing.

When Paul came to Ephesus a little later, he found some of the fruit of this emphasis by

Apollos on John's baptism. Discovering some serious deficiencies in the spiritual knowledge of some of the disciples there, Paul asked them, "Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" ([Acts 19:3,4](#)). Paul said John told the people when they were baptized that they should believe on Him, Jesus Christ, Who was to come. Believers' baptism does not carry that exhortation. Believer's baptism says one has already believed in Jesus Christ. Thus there is indeed a big difference in the two baptisms.

3. The Mode in This Baptizing

In the world of religion, the modes of baptism vary considerably. So it is not surprising to read that the mode of John's baptism is viewed in several very different ways. Immersion, pouring, and sprinkling are the three main views as to the mode of John's baptism. We firmly believe that the mode was immersion. The arguments for modes other than immersion are very weak at their best. Unlike immersion, the other modes are not supported at all by the meaning of the word baptize, the symbolism of the rite, or the statements of Scripture describing baptismal scenes. Immersion, however, is very strongly supported by these three considerations.

The mode in the word. The primary meaning of the Greek word translated into our English "baptize" is to dip or to immerse. "As for the question of the proper mode of baptism, the day is past when immersion can be ridiculed for its eccentricity and scorned for its indecency. Lexicographers universally agree that the primary meaning [of the word baptize] . . . is 'to dip' or 'to immerse,' and there is similar consensus of scholarly opinion that both the baptism of John and of the apostles was by immersion" (Jewett). Pouring, sprinkling, and other modes simply cannot be defended well by the primary meaning of the word. And we cannot ignore the meaning of the word if we are going to discern the proper mode of baptism.

The mode in the symbolism. We have already noted that the baptism of repentance symbolized that a person was worthy to die because of his or her sins. That is the only way one can look at his sins properly. The act of immersing one in water pictures death and burial. It would be very hard for sprinkling or pouring to picture anything like that. Believer's baptism also symbolizes death and burial plus the resurrection; and only immersion can adequately symbolize it, too. Paul certainly taught immersion for believers' baptism when he said, "Know ye not, that so [as] many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" ([Romans 6:3,4](#)), and where he also said, "Buried with him in baptism" ([Colossians 2:12](#)). The symbolism of John's baptism and also believer's baptism demands immersion.

The mode in the scene. There are several statements in the Gospels referring to situations involving John's baptizing which certainly imply the mode rather plainly. One such statement is found in the Gospel of John. It says, "John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there" ([John 3:23](#)). There would be no need of "much water" if sprinkling or pouring was being practiced. Only when immersion is practiced is much water needed. Some may argue that if John baptized a great multitude by pouring, he would need much water. Yes, he would need more water for pouring than for sprinkling; but a well would suffice in a case like that. The most logical conclusion to [John 3:23](#) is that immersion was required. But for those who oppose immersion, the logical is not always the accepted.

Another such statement is found in Matthew and repeated in Mark. It says, "Jesus, when he was baptized [by John], went up straightway out of the water" ([Matthew 3:16](#); cp. [Mark 1:10](#)). To come up out of the water has to mean that He was down in the water. Only immersion would require one to go down into the water to be baptized. Believers' baptism, which uses the same mode as John's baptism (the distinction of the two baptisms is only in the meaning), has a similar reference to going down into the water and coming up out of it. This concerns Philip and his baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch in Gaza. Scripture notes that "they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water . . ." ([Acts 8:38,39](#)). It is possible that they could both go down into the water for sprinkling or pouring, but the logical interpretation and understanding of the text is that they both went into the water so the eunuch could be immersed. Today, no minister goes into the water to sprinkle or pour. But the minister goes into the water to immerse.

In view of these considerations—the meaning of the word, the symbolism of the act, and the statements describing the scene—we can only conclude emphatically that the mode of John's baptism was immersion. The same can also be said for believers' baptism.

4. The Message at This Baptizing

Before we baptize anyone, we customarily examine them and instruct them regarding baptism. We explain to the person coming for baptism why we baptize and what baptism means, and we endeavor to answer any questions they may have about baptism. All of this examination and instruction is important so we do not baptize people who are not saved (and who, therefore, should not be baptized) or cause people to believe erroneous things about baptism, such as, they are being saved through the rite. As Charles Simeon says, "When a profession [or rite] of religion is become fashionable [such as baptism] . . . and common, it is necessary for ministers to be doubly careful that they do not sanction, much less promote, the delusions of hypocrites or impostors."

John the Baptist certainly did not sanction or promote the delusions of hypocrites or impostors in regards to baptism. He, like many of us today, also examined those coming to him for baptism. His examination included challenging, warning, and indicting those coming for baptism, as well as answering their questions about the rite.

[Luke 3:7-14](#) records John speaking to various people prior to their baptism. These people were from four distinct groups in society. These groups were the religious leaders, the regular people, the revenue collectors, and the Roman soldiers. We want to look here at the instructive messages John gave to each of these groups seeking to be baptized by him. The main theme of these messages to these groups was that folk should be changed in their conduct if they were truly repentant. He insisted on their works backing up their words. Since they were coming to be baptized as repenters, he wanted to be sure their repentance was genuine.

The messages John spoke to each group especially fit their particular behavior problems. It obviously required some holy boldness for John to deal so faithfully and forcefully with each group about their besetting sins; but John had the spiritual character to do so, a character seldom seen in the ministry today.

The religious leaders. John's message to this group was the strongest, most denunciatory message he gave to any of these four groups in our text. It really exhibited the holy boldness of John. He said to them, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin 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; every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" ([Luke 3:7-9](#)). Luke calls this group which came to John the Baptist for baptism simply "the multitude" ([Luke 3:7](#)), but Matthew is more specific and tells us that this group was the Pharisees and the Sadducees ([Matthew 3:7](#)). The Pharisees and Sadducees really needed this strong denunciatory message.

John's message to these Pharisees and Sadducees was fourfold. It spoke of their character, their command, their condemnation, and their circumstances.

First, it spoke of their *character*. "O generation of vipers" ([v. 7](#)) was the way John characterized this group. It was a good characterization of this group because "of the poisonous and infectious nature of their principles, and the manifest relation which, both in sentiment and conduct, they bare to the old serpent the devil" (Simeon). John was not the only one to call this detestable, holier-than-thou, arrogant, self-righteous, hypocritical religious group this name. Jesus Christ gave them the same character description when He indicted them later in His public ministry. Christ said of them, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" ([Matthew 23:33](#)). Strong language to be sure, but language that accurately described this bunch.

We would do well today to be as accurate in labeling conduct. Unfortunately, we are calling many bad people and bad deeds by good and respectable names and thus failing to properly condemn evil. It takes real courage to label things correctly, and few have this courage to buck the popular attitudes of the day and bring upon themselves the wrath and rejection of man.

Second, it spoke of their *command*. John commanded them to “Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance” (v. 8). John saw right through these religious leaders and saw clearly their utter hypocrisy. Christ also denounced the hypocrisy of this group. In [Matthew 23](#) He used the words hypocrite or hypocrisy eight times in speaking of these people. They were strong on talk but weak on walk. Jesus said to do as they say but not as they do; “for they say, and [but] do not” ([Matthew 23:3](#)). They were coming to John the Baptist to be baptized but without the fruits that evidenced the genuineness of their repentance. They wanted the recognition of the rite but not the responsibility of the rite. John saw no evidence of true repentance in their conduct and told them so.

John’s insistence here that those coming to him for baptism give evidence of the change in their lives before they are baptized should encourage us to do the same in our churches. When some come for baptism who do not give good evidence that they are born again, we need to challenge them, rebuke them, and refuse them. This will not make friends, but it has a good and wise precedence in John the Baptist.

Third, it spoke of their *condemnation*. “Begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father” (v. 8). John condemns a belief these hypocrites clung to with tenacity. They felt that being a descendent of Abraham was all that was necessary to enter heaven. It was the physical relationship that they stressed, not a spiritual relationship. But God will have none of that.

You may be a pure blooded Jew, or a descendent of the greatest preachers in history, or have a host of relatives that are outstanding Christians; but that will not make you a Christian. Only when your heart is right with God can you claim salvation. Your birth, race, country, or church is no substitute for a change of heart. These things cannot save you. Only faith in Jesus Christ will save your soul.

Fourth, it spoke of their *circumstances*. Their circumstances were very perilous. John said of this group, “And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees; every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (v. 9). No one had any trouble understanding this language in those days. When a tree or vine did not bear fruit, it was eventually cut down to make way for a tree or vine that would bear fruit. The language of John the Baptist, indicating the axe was already laid at the root of the tree, showed the imminency of the axe doing its work on non-fruit bearing trees. This illustration pictured the perilous situation of those who did not exhibit the fruit of repentance. Lacking in fruit, judgment was imminent for these folk. They would soon be cut down and cast into the “fire” of hell.

How did these hypocrites respond to John’s severely indicting but very true and needed message? They rejected it in total. “And all the people that heard him, and the publicans [tax collectors], justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers [lawyers, scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees are all part of the same arrogant, hypocritical religious group] rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized by him” ([Luke 7:29,30](#)). “If heaven could be secured by submitting to a rite,

‘multitudes’ would come for it, but the crowd thins quickly when the administrator of the rite becomes the vehement preacher of repentance” (Maclaren). Of course some church folk will get upset with their pastor when he, like John the Baptist, faithfully preaches the Word and therefore firmly and forcefully indicts sin; for it will often drive off a number of people. These critics, who are spiritually lacking themselves, do not like losing their crowd or any worldly, prestigious person from their church. So they attack the pastor and accuse him of lack of love (a favorite accusation) and often demand a replacement for him. Being a faithful man of God often results in lack of acceptance and honor by men. But let God’s ministers be faithful anyway, for they will be accepted and honored by God which is what really matters.

The regular people. This group is not associated with any particular vocation, as are the other three groups. They are simply called “the people” ([Luke 3:10](#)). They were the regular people, the ordinary citizen, the general public. When coming to be baptized by John, they asked, “What shall we do?” ([Luke 3:10](#)). John answered, “He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise” ([Luke 3:11](#)). Two things can be said about this group. They were sincere and they were selfish.

First, they were *sincere*. This group’s sincerity is seen in their asking John, “What shall we do?” They had heard the command given to the Pharisees and Sadducees to bring forth fruits of repentance; now they ask John what they should be doing to give evidence of their repentance. Hypocrites do not ask a question like this, and so Scripture does not record the Pharisees and Sadducees asking this question. They were not earnest and thus did not care about knowing what they should do. But when a man truly changes in his attitude towards God, he will seek to know what God wants him to do. This is illustrated in Paul’s life, as an example. As soon as he met up with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he began asking, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” ([Acts 9:6](#)). When a man wants to do his duty, he will earnestly inquire what his duty is. Failure to learn one’s duty is indicative of a lack of desire to do it. Therefore, these folk here, as well as the tax collectors and soldiers who also asked the same question, gave much more evidence of sincerity in their repentance than did the Pharisees and Sadducees who were hypocrites through and through.

Second, they were *selfish*. The besetting sin of this group was selfishness. They ignored the needs of those around them, though they were capable of alleviating these needs. John said they let the poorly clothed continue that way, and they let those without food go hungry. The natural man is basically selfish. If he does do any deeds of charity, he generally does it to exalt self in the giving of charity more than to alleviate the sufferers. This is a sin typical of the general public. If these folk are truly repentant then they will show genuine concern for others instead of being self-centered.

The revenue collectors. Despised tax collectors were also among those seeking baptism by John the Baptist. “Then came also publicans [tax collectors] 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” ([Luke 3:12,13](#)). Everyone knew what the tax collectors’ main sin was; so it

was not surprising that John brought this up in his dealing with these inquirers. Each person the Roman Empire hired as a tax collector was responsible to give Rome a stated amount of money. How much the tax collector collected from the people was of no concern to the Roman Empire as long as Rome got its determined amount. This gave the tax collectors license to overcharge—which they did frequently. When this group came to John and asked what would evidence repentance in their life, John did not dodge their big sin. He met it head-on without flinching. John told them plainly what they needed to do if they were going to be truly repentant. They were to start being honest and not overcharge people on their taxes.

If a dishonest man wants others to believe he is converted, he will have to start being honest. If a liar wants others to believe he has been converted, he will have to stop lying. If a thief wants others to believe he has been converted, he will have to stop stealing. “By their fruits ye shall know them” ([Matthew 7:20](#)). Changing their ways will not save them of course, but that is not the issue here. The issue here is that of giving outward proof of one’s claim of character change.

The Roman soldiers. The fourth group was a group we would not readily expect to be seeking baptism from John. They were Roman soldiers. Military men are not known for much interest in religion. But John’s message had touched them too, and so they also inquired of John. “And the soldiers likewise demanded [asked] 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” ([Luke 3:14](#)). John hit them in three areas where they were habitually sinful: their savage treatment of others, their slanderous accusations, and their salary discontentment. While these problems were especially peculiar to the soldiers then, you do not have to be a soldier to have these problems; for many in every walk of life have these problems today.

First, he addressed their *savagery*. Brutal violence would be particularly easy for a soldier; for he was in the enforcing business. The depraved nature of man ever delights in abusing and rough handling others; and given the opportunity and the tools, it will seldom hesitate to do so—boxers, football players, wrestlers, bloody crime, and police brutality all demonstrate this truth. It does not take much imagination to visualize what these Roman soldiers would do in their scornful enforcing of the law in Israel. Spears, swords, and clubs wielded by muscular and hard-hearted soldiers would do plenty of damage very quickly.

“Do violence” means literally “to shake violently.” Godet says the Greek word translated “do violence” appears to be connected with a Latin word from which we get our English word concussion. Obviously, then, the word means some pretty rough treatment. John says that would stop if the soldiers were truly repentant. Compassion, not cruelty, is a mark of improved relationship with God.

Second, he addressed their *slander*. False accusation here was generally for the purpose of obtaining bribes. A soldier’s statements carried much weight in government tribunals, and

their accusations could not be very well contested. Therefore, they could by false accusation put a person, particularly a wealthy person, in great stress. But if the wealthy person would cross their palms with a stated sum of money, they would cease the accusation. It was a cruel means of extorting money; but as is the case with many law enforcing officers, be he a policeman or an inspector of building code compliance or other similar task, bribery was part and parcel of the work; and those without character readily resorted to it. Payments “under the table” were and still are pushed on helpless victims. It is definitely not God’s way; and, therefore, if one guilty of such conduct is repenting of his sins, he will have to forsake this sin to prove his repentance to others.

That the soldiers were quite willing to take bribes is demonstrated rather conspicuously in [Matthew 28:11–15](#). There they are reported as taking a bribe to say the body of Christ was stolen from the grave by the disciples. The religious leaders did not want the resurrection idea to be the explanation for the missing body, so they “gave large [much] money unto the soldiers” ([v. 12](#)), and the soldiers readily “took the money” ([v. 15](#)).

Third, he addressed their *salary*. These soldiers had problems with their wages. Military pay has never been that which caused men to join the military to get rich. Legislators and rulers can raise their salaries to great amounts, but it seems that those who risk their lives for their country can do so on a small fee. So it was not uncommon for a soldier to complain about his salary. The salary problem doubtless also encouraged some of the extortion business we just noted.

This problem of complaining about one’s salary is not limited to military personnel but will be found in people in every walk of life. Therefore, John’s exhortation will not be popular; for “Be content with your wages” steps on a lot of toes. It is not the language of our day. Strikes in every area of the work force are common. Even folk with million dollar salaries, such as professional athletes, know nothing about contentment with their wages. About the only place contentment is found is in the church being content with their pastor’s meager salary. But that is a wicked contentment. A great demonstration of righteous contentment will be found in those godly missionaries and pastors who without complaint serve laboriously year after year on small, inadequate salaries.

Contentment with one’s wages would reflect repentance in the area of materialism. One wonders about those who claim to be saved and interested primarily in the things of heaven when they are always complaining about their salary. It indicates they are not what they claim to be spiritually. John demands evidence to prove one’s repentance. Would we be hard pressed to provide evidence if we were being examined as to the genuineness of our professed faith?

B. THE BAPTIZING OF THE CHRIST

The most momentous baptism that John ever performed was the baptism of Jesus Christ. This baptism occurred when Christ came “from Galilee [specifically ‘Nazareth of Galilee’ according to [Mark 1:9](#)] to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of [by] him” ([Matthew 3:13](#)).

The person being baptized and the events accompanying the baptism all made this baptism the most special of all the baptizings by John the Baptist. And adding to the momentous character of the baptism was the fact that this baptism was also an epoch making event, for it commenced the public ministry of Jesus Christ. Christ had lived in Nazareth of Galilee ever since as a small child He had returned from Egypt where He had been taken by Joseph and Mary shortly after His birth to escape from Herod's murderous designs. But the time had come, when He was "about thirty years of age" ([Luke 3:23](#)), for His public ministry to begin. So He left His home and obscurity in Nazareth and came the seventy-five or more miles south to seek out John to be baptized and thereby begin His public ministry.

In our study of this significant event (which will be largely from [Matthew 3:13-17](#), the most extensive account given of the baptism in Scripture), we will consider the protest about the baptism, the purpose of the baptism, the performing of the baptism, the praying during the baptism, the proof after the baptism, and the proclamation after the baptism.

1. The Protest About the Baptism

When Christ came to John to be baptized by him, John protested. "John forbade him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" ([Matthew 3:14](#)). In this protest of Christ's baptism, we have a testimony of both the humility of John and the holiness of Christ.

The humility of John. When Christ came to John for baptism, John was no longer an obscure preacher. He had become very famous in Jerusalem and Judea. He had great crowds, for folk were flocking from all over the region to hear him. His name had become a household word in those parts of Israel. Such fame can destroy the best of men by puffing them up with great pride. But John was not so affected. When Jesus Christ walked into his presence, he saw himself greatly inferior. "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me [to be baptized]?"

Christ's baptism was of the Holy Spirit ([Matthew 3:11](#)); but though John had been "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" ([Luke 1:15](#)), yet he still humbly perceived that he needed Christ's baptism. How true it is that "They who have much of the Spirit of God . . . see that they need more, and need to apply themselves to Christ for more" (Matthew Henry). The nearer the humble soul draws to the light of Jesus Christ, the more he feels his own inadequacies and cries out to God for help. And those who serve the Lord the best are those who bow the lowest before Him. The truly great men are humble men especially before God.

The holiness of Christ. Because John's baptism was a baptism of repentance which involved the confession of sins, the protesting of Christ's need of baptism by John gave a great testimony of the sinlessness of Christ. In protesting Christ's baptism, John was plainly saying that Christ had no need of repentance; for He had no sins of which to repent. That was indeed true! Christ was sinless; He was the holy Son of God Who did no wrong. He was "without

blemish and without spot” ([1 Peter 1:19](#)). Therefore, He had no need of repentance. That is not the view of many, however. Many in every age have tried to make Christ out as a sinner—even a gross sinner which is how some apostate preachers and Hollywood movies depict Christ. But the testimony that is true will emphatically declare the sinlessness of Christ.

2. The Purpose of the Baptism

When John protested baptizing Jesus, he was instructed as to the purpose of the baptism. Jesus said, “Suffer [permit] it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” ([Matthew 3:15](#)). This statement is the key to understanding the baptism of Christ, a baptism which has been a puzzle to many.

The chief reason the baptism of Christ has been a puzzle to many folk is the same reason John protested it. The reason is grounded in the character of John’s baptism and in the character of Christ’s person. The two just do not seem to belong together. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. But Christ, of course, had no sins for which to repent. Therefore, a baptism of repentance seems totally unnecessary and inappropriate for Him. However, this statement made by Christ to John removes the objection to Christ’s baptism by giving a noble purpose for its occurrence. The purpose of Christ’s baptism was to symbolically show why He had come to earth and what His ministry was mainly about. And this symbolic statement about His ministry was made very appropriately at the start of His public ministry.

Why did Christ come to earth? What was His ministry all about? The answer is that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” ([1 Timothy 1:15](#)). To do this, Christ took the place of sinful man and died vicariously upon the cross of Calvary, was buried, and then was resurrected from the grave. This provided all the righteousness man needed to be saved. Being baptized by John (which is how John is included in the “us” of [Matthew 3:15](#)) symbolically declared these great truths about the provision of righteousness for man through Jesus Christ. It did so in a twofold way.

First, it showed Christ’s identification with sinful man. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. So in being baptized by John, Christ symbolically put Himself in the place of sinful man. He identified Himself with them. As on the cross, He was here being “numbered with the transgressors” ([Mark 15:28](#)) in his being baptized by John. This truth of Christ taking the place of sinful man in order to bring about man’s righteousness (“fulfil all righteousness”) is spoken of by Paul when he said, “For he hath made him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

Second, it showed what Christ would experience for sinful man. It symbolically portrayed His death, burial, and resurrection (only the immersion mode could portray these three things) which is the foundation of man’s salvation. That Christ’s baptism was symbolic of this work of bringing righteousness to man is emphasized by the word “thus” in Christ’s statement to John the Baptist. The word “is a translation of the Greek Word ‘hotos,’ and

means ‘in a like manner,’ ‘in a similar way,’ etc. It is a word used to introduce similitudes . . . In [John 3:14](#) we read, ‘And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so [same word] must the Son of Man be lifted up’ (Arthur F. Williams). The word also appears in [Matthew 12:40](#), “as Jonas [Jonah] was three days and three nights in the whale’s [great fish, not whale] belly; so [same word] shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Hence, what Jesus said to John was that his baptizing Christ would symbolize what would be done to “fulfill” (complete, bring about in its fullness) all the righteousness man needed for his salvation. In the place of the sinner, Jesus would die, be buried, and then rise from the grave to be man’s Redeemer. As Paul said, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel . . . by which also ye are saved . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” ([1 Corinthians 15:1–4](#)).

3. The Performing of the Baptism

In a beautiful act of submission, John “suffered him [submitted to him]” ([Matthew 3:15](#)) and baptized Christ. F. B. Meyer said regarding John’s submission to Christ here, “In all our human life, there is nothing more attractive than when a strong man yields to another, accepts a deeper interpretation of duty than he had perceived, and is prepared to set aside his strong convictions of propriety before the tender pleadings of the still, soft voice. Yield to Christ, dear heart. Suffer Him to have his way. Take his yoke, and be meek and lowly of heart—so shalt thou find rest.”

Would that all of us were as acquiescing to the will of Christ as John the Baptist was. Too often, however, we rebel against the holy wishes of God—but on the other hand seem quite ready to yield to the unholy wishes of the world. Even though the wishes of God are filled with much wisdom (can there be any greater wisdom than “to fulfil all righteousness?”), we frequently rebel and refuse to do what He wants to have done. But what disaster we court when we rebel against the Lord. What if John the Baptist had acted like we often act and had stubbornly refused to baptize Christ? It would surely have destroyed his ministry, and John would not have been the great man of God that we read about in Scripture. Frankly, it is hard for us to comprehend the negative results that would have occurred in John’s refusal. So it is with any who refuse the will of God for their life. When God makes duty plain, as He did to John the Baptist, the only wise thing to do is obey immediately. Let all our ideas and plans be subservient to the will of God.

4. The Praying During the Baptism

Christ prayed during His baptism. Luke says, “Jesus also being baptized, and praying” ([Luke 3:21](#)). Only Luke records the act of Christ praying during His baptism, but this is not surprising, for Luke records more of Christ’s prayers than any of the other Gospels. Christ’s prayer here instructs us in the practice of prayer and the place of prayer.

The practice of prayer. This praying of Christ at His baptism is the first recorded prayer of Christ. But of course it was not the first time He had prayed; for had He not been praying previously to this experience, He would not have prayed during this experience. The more we pray, the more we will pray. Backwardness in praying generally reflects failure to have prayed much in the past. When we perform an exercise frequently, we find it easier to do. The same is true with prayer. So praying at His baptism was an indication that Christ had done much praying before His baptism.

It is of great value to be much in prayer about events and happenings in one's life, especially those critical major events which guide and affect so much of the rest of one's life, such as this baptism did with Christ. This baptism set in motion His public ministry and all that was involved in it, including the testing by Satan. To begin a ministry in prayer is absolutely vital if one expects to have much of a ministry for God. We must practice prayer faithfully, if we are going to live faithfully for the Lord. So many shipwrecks in life can be attributed to the fact that great and important crisis and events were not met with prayer.

The place of prayer. Man has a tendency to think he can only pray in certain circumstances, such as, on one's knees at an altar in some cathedral or in some special quiet place or in a church service, etc. But to the contrary, we can pray at any time and in any place. This is seen in Christ praying when He was being immersed in the Jordan River. We do not usually think of that situation as being a place of prayer, but Christ sanctified it by His praying in that place. Therefore, we can pray in the midst of all our activities. We are seldom in situations where we can stop and go to some quiet place and pray. While those times are blessed times indeed, Christ teaches us here, by His praying when He was being baptized, that we can pray in the midst of our activities just as well as in those quiet places. Few things so profit the soul and improve the activity as prayer. And it is good to know that any place can be made a place of prayer. Hence, we have no excuse for not praying and for not praying much.

Another encouraging illustration of praying during our activities is found in Nehemiah. Nehemiah was concerned about the poor conditions in Jerusalem and reflected it in his countenance when performing his duty before King Artaxerxes. The king inquired as to Nehemiah's concern and asked him, "For what dost thou make request? So I [Nehemiah] prayed to the God of heaven" ([Nehemiah 2:4](#)). Between the question and the answer, Nehemiah lifted up his heart in quick prayer to God just as Christ prayed when He was being baptized. The place of prayer can be anywhere. Let us therefore practice prayer everywhere.

5. The Proof After the Baptism

Right after Christ was baptized, "the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him" ([Matthew 3:16](#)). John the Baptist also saw this most significant event. "John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit

descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him” ([John 1:32](#)).

This seeing of the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus Christ was proof to John that this was indeed the Messiah, the One Whom John had come to herald to the people. How do we know this is so? We know it is so because John later said, “He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God” ([John 1:33,34](#)). John obviously knew many things about Christ when Christ came to be baptized. Christ was not a totally unknown entity to John at that time; for as we noted in his protesting Christ’s baptism, John knew of Christ’s impeccable character. But the absolute confirmation for John of Who the Messiah was came in the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ in plain view of John the Baptist. When that happened, John knew without a shadow of a doubt Who was the Messiah, the One he was preparing the way for among the people.

That the descent of the Spirit upon Christ gave proof to John the Baptist as to just exactly Who Christ was reminds us that not only did the Holy Spirit give assurance as to Whom the Savior was, but He also gives assurance as to whom the saved are. The Apostle Paul instructs us of this encouraging assurance and confirmation of our salvation when he says, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” ([Romans 8:16](#)). All of this instructs us in the truth that God’s works and ways and Word are not without proof. And the proofs and confirmations will be excellent and forceful. Skeptics of the faith can not claim lack of proof as the reason they are skeptics. They are skeptics because they simply refuse to believe the truth though it be supported ever so excellently by “many infallible proofs” ([Acts 1:3](#)).

6. The Proclamation After the Baptism

When the Spirit of God descended upon Christ, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” ([Matthew 3:17](#)). With this utterance from heaven by God the Father, we have the entire Holy Trinity of God prominently manifested at the baptism of Christ. The first person, the Father, spoke from heaven; the second person, the Son, was baptized; and the third person, the Spirit, descended upon Christ in the form of a dove.

This proclamation of the Father from heaven declared the Deity of Christ (“This is my beloved Son”), and it declared the sinlessness of Christ (“In whom I am well pleased”). Many things would be said of Christ in the next few years of Christ’s ministry which would not reflect this proclamation and would not be complimentary at all. Christ would be called an illegitimate son ([John 8:41](#)) instead of “my beloved Son,” and He would be called many things which would picture Him as a gross sinner instead of the sinless person He was that gained the “well pleased” from God. Wicked mankind was not pleased with Him and said so many times and in many ways. But God was pleased with Him, and that is what was important to Christ.

That is what ought to really matter with us, too. Nothing is so important in our lives as what God thinks and says about us. It should be our great goal in life to live in such a way that God will commend us, not condemn us. We should endeavor to seek His praise more than the praise of anyone else. However, we will discover that the more God commends us, the more men will condemn us. When God is pleased with us, few men will be pleased with us. When God thinks highly of us, few men will think highly of us. But wise men will have little concern about man's approval. They will on the other hand count no cost too great to gain the "well pleased" of God, for this is the approval that matters the most.

VI. BEHOLD

[MATTHEW 3:11,12](#); [JOHN 1:6-8,15,29](#); [3:25-30](#)

THE MOST FAMOUS statement of John the Baptist is "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" ([John 1:29](#)). "Behold" Jesus Christ became the emphasis of John's ministry when Jesus Christ came on the scene and began His public ministry. John had indeed spoken of Christ before Christ began his public ministry, but it was not the main emphasis of his message. The main theme at the beginning was repentance. But all of that changed after the baptism of Christ. As F. B. Meyer said, "The baptism and revelation of Christ had a marvellous effect on the ministry of the Forerunner. Previous to that memorable day, the burden of his teaching had been in the direction of repentance and confession of sin. But afterwards, the whole force of his testimony was towards the person and glory of the Shepherd of Israel. He understood that for the remainder of his brief ministry, which perhaps did not greatly exceed six months, he must bend all his strength to announcing to the people the prerogatives and claims of Him who stood amongst them."

This change in John's ministry from the emphasis on repentance to the emphasis on the Redeemer did not reflect negatively upon John. It did not indicate that he had started out wrongly and was correcting himself. Rather it was the logical sequence of his ministry. Men must first be brought face to face with their sinfulness—which is the message of repentance. Then when they become properly conscious of their great sinfulness, they will be ready for the message about the Redeemer Who can take away their sins. John was to prepare men for Christ. To prepare men for Christ, he had to start out by preaching about repentance. This prepared men for the preaching about the Redeemer.

In this chapter we will look especially at what John the Baptist had to say about Jesus Christ—not only when the main emphasis of his message was on Christ, but also even before Christ came on the scene when John was still emphasizing repentance. What a person says about Jesus Christ reveals the character of that person and the character of his ministry.

One of the main keys to discerning whether a man or movement is true or false will be found in what he says about Christ. What John the Baptist said about Jesus Christ helps us to understand why he was such a great man of God.

In this study of what John said about Christ, we will note the witness of Christ, the work of Christ, and the worship of Christ. To elaborate, we will first see the way in which John spoke of Christ; then we will learn what John said was the work of Christ; and, finally, we will observe from his statements about Christ that John truly worshiped Him.

A. THE WITNESS OF CHRIST

When we take up the matter of John's speaking of Christ, we will learn some important things that are involved in being a true witness for Christ. To be a witness of Christ was John's foundational calling. Scripture makes that crystal clear. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light" ([John 1:6-8](#)). And John fulfilled his calling, for Scripture says, "John bare witness of him" ([John 1:15](#)). No one witnessed better for Jesus Christ than John the Baptist. He was a witness par excellence of Christ.

To help us understand what this witnessing by John the Baptist involved, and, therefore, what all true witnessing for Christ involves, we want to look here at the meaning of this witnessing and the mission of this witnessing.

1. The Meaning of This Witnessing

Today the word "witness" is frequently used quite flippantly and unintelligently in our churches. We are told to witness for Christ—and we should—but what does witnessing involve? Is it just taking someone down "the Roman's road" or showing them "the four spiritual laws" or giving them a gospel tract? These things are not to be discredited, but true witnessing for Jesus Christ—the kind which John the Baptist did—consists in a great deal more than that. In fact, it involves a lot more than most people realize.

To find out what true witnessing means and involves, we look at the meaning of the word "witness" used in these texts in the Gospel of John. (This word is found more in the Gospel of John than the other Gospels. The word in both its noun and verb forms is found some 47 times in John while the other three Gospels only use the word 6 times altogether.) The word meaning involves three important things which need to be part of our witnessing if we are to truly witness for Christ: a public testimony, a competent testimony, and a dedicated testimony.

A public testimony. In Thayer's Greek-English lexicon, we are told that this word means "to give (not to keep back) testimony." This is fundamental, basic, and elementary in the matter of witnessing. If we are going to witness for Christ, or for anyone, we must go public. We cannot be silent. There has to be a public declaration of some sort. The witness of Christ by

John the Baptist was certainly public. He spoke out before the multitudes and told them about Christ. You cannot be a witness if you do nothing to help others learn about Jesus Christ, for the basic work of witnessing is to make Christ known to others. You may not be able to speak to multitudes like John the Baptist did, but you can help others to do so, and you can at least speak to individuals.

A competent testimony. The word “witness” means a “competent testimony concerning that which one has himself seen, heard, or experienced” (Hendriksen). Thayer amplifies by saying the word means “to be a witness, to bear witness, testify, i.e. to affirm that one has seen or heard or experienced something, or (so in the N.T.) that he knows it because taught by Divine revelation or inspiration.” Therefore, to be a genuine witness for Christ, you must know what you are talking about. As Pink says, “A witness is one who knows what he says and says what he knows. He deals not with speculations, he speaks not of his own opinions, but he testifies to what he knows to be the truth.”

John the Baptist was an extremely competent testimony. As an example, Scripture says, “John bare record [witness], saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. . . . And I saw, and bare record [witness] that this is the Son of God” ([John 1:32,34](#)). John knew whereof he spoke. It was not guesswork, speculation, or imagination. Rather, he spoke from personal knowledge and experience. He spoke as a result of revelation from God. In contrast, too much of what goes under the guise of “witnessing” today is ignorance, not knowledge, speaking. It lacks competency and genuineness. It lacks personal experience and leaves out Divine revelation—the Word of God. Witnessing is not a discussion group; it is not the sharing of opinions or ideas. It is to declare with certainty and with conviction that which we know about Jesus Christ. The less we know about Christ, the less competent is our testimony and the less value it has. Spiritual ignorance does not promote a true witness for Jesus Christ. And because there is so much spiritual ignorance in our churches today, much that goes under the name of witnessing does not qualify as the real thing.

A dedicated testimony. The word translated witness in our English translations is the word from which we get, via transliteration, our English word martyr. Thus, Vincent says that one of things the word “witness” denotes is “One who vindicates his testimony by suffering: a martyr.” W. E. Vine says in this regard that a martyr is “one who bears ‘witness’ by his death.” The close association of martyr with witness is seen in Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*. When you look up “martyr” in this dictionary, it simply says “see witness.”

In view of the close association of the word witness with martyr, to witness for Christ means, therefore, that you are taking a strong, dedicated stand which you will back up with your life. When you truly witness for Christ, you are no longer neutral. You have committed yourself—and to the great extent of laying your life on the line regarding what you have said about Christ. John the Baptist knew well and personally about this sort of commitment, for

his witnessing of Christ and His commands eventually cost him his life. Christians in every age have followed John in martyrdom because their witness for Christ was also dedicated to the extent of supporting it with their lives. Yes, witnessing for Christ involves a good deal more than most realize and more than most want it to involve.

2. The Mission of This Witnessing

What was the purpose of John's witnessing for Jesus Christ? The answer is "that all men through him might believe" ([John 1:7](#)). John the Baptist spoke of Christ with the intent that men should believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. He was sent to get people prepared to receive Christ, not reject Him. His witness of Christ was to cause people to receive Christ with due honor and devotion. Of course, not all to whom John spoke received Christ. In fact, many rejected Christ even though John gave a great witness of Him. But that is not John's fault. He faithfully discharged his duty of witnessing for Christ so that people would know of Christ and therefore be encouraged to believe in Him.

We must do nothing less. How we speak of Christ and what we speak of Christ should be that which will encourage men to believe in Him. But this is not the goal and objective of much of religion in the world. Much of the religious world today speaks of Christ not for the purpose of getting men to believe in Him but rather to disbelieve in Him. The message of cults and isms (which includes modernism—apostate Protestant churches who want us to believe they are for Christianity) is one which discredits Christ, denies Christ, and dishonors Christ. Instead of leading men to believe in Him, they lead men to reject Him, denounce Him, and scorn Him.

It needs to be emphasized here that this witnessing is to lead men to Christ, not to ourselves. John came "to bear witness of the Light," not of himself. Pink says, "This should ever be the aim of the preacher: to get his hearers to look away from himself to Another. He is not to testify of himself, nor about himself, but he is to 'preach Christ' [[1 Corinthians 1:23](#)]." We need to be reminded of this truth in our day, for many who talk the most about witnessing today talk the most about themselves. We have heard these men speak and have read what they have written; and the obvious thing about their speaking and writing is the great and obnoxious emphasis they give to themselves, not to Jesus Christ. They are the hero of every story (and their messages are mostly stories—many of which are far-fetched) and the center of all the action. Christ is mostly a postscript they add on at the end to press for decisions so that they can boast of how many decisions they have won to Christ. But the object of testifying for Christ is not to exalt the one doing the witnessing but to exalt Christ in order to lead men to Him.

B. THE WORK OF CHRIST

Scripture records John the Baptist speaking primarily of three distinct and important things which Christ would do. They were His baptizing with the Spirit, His judging of sinners, and

His sacrificing for salvation. To put it another way, Christ's work had to do with the Spirit of God, the judgment of God, and the Lamb of God.

1. His Work and the Spirit of God

Christ's work in regards to the Spirit of God is addressed by John when he said, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit" ([Matthew 3:11](#)). John the Baptist was the first to announce that the great blessing of the Holy Spirit coming upon God's people in a new and more blessed way would be through Jesus Christ. Heretofore the Spirit had come upon a few men in limited ways for special tasks and on special occasions in the Old Testament. This was a temporal thing and not available for everyone. Intimations that there was more to come are recorded in the Old Testament, such as, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh" ([Joel 2:28](#), cp. [Proverbs 1:23](#)) and "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you" ([Ezekiel 36:26](#)). These and other like texts encouraged the pious Israelites to believe something more was in store for God's people than what had been the usual experience. So when John spoke of a baptism of the Holy Spirit, the language would immediately greatly excite the spiritually hungry soul.

We note three things here about the baptism of the Holy Spirit: the contrasting of it to John's baptism, the commencing of it at Pentecost, and the consequences of it upon those who experience it.

The contrasting of it. To emphasize the greatness of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, John spoke in a way that indicated this baptism administered by Christ was superior to the baptism administered by himself. John said, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance; but he who cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" ([Matthew 3:11](#)). Not only is the person of Christ presented as superior to John (which we will see more about later in this chapter), but also His baptizing is presented as superior to John's. Each time John's baptism is spoken of in Scripture in conjunction with the Spirit baptism, it is always contrasted to the Spirit's baptism to show that it is inferior to the Spirit baptism (cp. [Mark 1:8](#), [Luke 3:16](#), [John 1:33](#), [Acts 1:5](#), and [Acts 11:16](#)). And indeed it is. The baptism with the Spirit which is administered by Christ is much more important than John's baptism. John's baptism was simply symbolic. Yes, it was important; or God would not have ordered John to baptize. But it is not nearly as important as the baptism of the Spirit.

The commencing of it. The baptism of the Spirit commenced at Pentecost. Jesus made that clear when He said to the disciples on the day of His ascension, "John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence [from now]" ([Acts 1:5](#)). This baptism did not occur and could not occur until Christ ascended; for Christ had told the disciples earlier, "I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you" ([John 16:7](#)). The baptism of the Holy Spirit was completely dependent on Jesus Christ.

The consequences of it. The baptism with of Spirit is a tremendous blessing for the believer. It is that which places him in the body of Christ. “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Greeks, whether we be bond or free” ([1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). This baptism occurs when one believes in Jesus Christ. “Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost . . . God gave them the like gift . . . who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ” ([Acts 11:16,17](#)). It gives us absolute, permanent soul security, “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory . . . And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption” ([Ephesians 1:13,14; 4:30](#)). And among other blessings that it brings, it is involved in helping us serve Christ. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto [of] me” ([Acts 1:8](#).)” Yes, the announcement by John of Christ’s work of baptizing with the Spirit was an announcement that ought to have caused every listener to rejoice exceedingly. Christ was bringing in greater spiritual blessings than they had ever had before.

This baptism has received a lot of negative attention in our day with the unscriptural tongues’ movement. The Assemblies of God denomination, as an example, believes that speaking in tongues is not just a sign of the baptism, but they believe it is *the* sign. It is a tragedy that the great blessing of this baptism with Holy Spirit—which is administered by Jesus Christ, not by the Holy Spirit—is reduced by many to an emphasis on a questionable tongues’ experience. There are higher and nobler blessings in this baptism than any tongues’ experience could possibly produce—even if the current tongues’ experience is a valid Scriptural experience, which we definitely do not believe it is.

2. His Work and the Judgment of God

Scripture says that God “hath given him [Christ] authority to execute judgment” ([John 5:27](#)), and John did not exclude that work of judgment from the work of Christ as so many ministers do today. The popular talk about Jesus Christ from most pulpits is of a lowly, meek, and loving Jesus Who would not hurt a flea. Such pulpiteers abhor the idea that Jesus would ever bring judgment upon anyone. To their twisted thinking, that would make Christ unloving and unkind. But how wrong and unholy are such views of Christ. Christ has plenty to do with judgment, as we learn from John’s preaching.

John spoke of Christ’s judgment work in terms of baptizing with fire ([Matthew 3:11](#)) and of burning chaff with unquenchable fire ([Matthew 3:12](#)). These terms are strong and show man how terrible his sins are. Furthermore, the language should make every soul quake at the thought of rejecting Christ. Christ can be a wonderful, loving Christ when He is received as Savior. But spurn Him, and the day will come when you will experience His justified wrath. This is not popular preaching, but it is very valid and needed preaching.

There is disagreement among good men of God about whether the baptism of fire ([Matthew 3:11](#)) refers to the baptism of the Holy Spirit or a separate baptism. We believe it refers to a separate baptism—a baptism of judgment. When the context ([Matthew 3:9–12](#)) of John’s statement about the baptism of fire is examined, one can readily see a parallelism regarding the believer and the unbeliever and the contrasting outcome for each. There are three separate illustrations given by John to the people in his messages recorded in this Matthew passage (and also in [Luke 3:9–17](#)) which show the contrast that each will experience. These illustrations show that the believer will experience blessing, but the unbeliever will experience judgment—and in each case judgment is by fire.

The first illustration has to do with fruit trees ([Matthew 3:10](#)). The tree bearing fruit (which symbolizes the true believer) will not be cut down but will remain to grow and bear more fruit. The non-fruit bearing tree will be cut down and “cast into the fire.” We looked at this in detail in our last chapter.

The second illustration has to do with baptizing ([Matthew 3:11](#)). Two baptisms are mentioned: the baptism of the Spirit and the baptism of fire. The baptism of the Spirit is, of course, for the believer. The baptism of fire is for the unbeliever. And what an accurate description of the judgment of hell is the baptism of fire. The sinner will be cast into the lake of fire—a terrible immersion from which the unbeliever will never be delivered.

The third illustration John gave regarding the contrast of believers and unbelievers had to do with threshing ([Matthew 3:12](#)). Christ is pictured as separating the grain from the chaff. “Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner [granary], but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” ([Matthew 3:12](#)). The wheat, which represents the believer, is gathered safely into the granary. But the chaff, which speaks of the unbeliever “will burn” and “with unquenchable fire.”

So you have three pictures presented by John: fruit trees, baptizing, and threshing. And in each case you have fire. It would be illogical and would completely ignore the instructive parallelism if the baptism of fire in the second picture meant blessing instead of judgment.

Further support for the belief that the baptism of fire means judgment (and therefore not the baptism of the Spirit) is found in the fact that other significant references to the Spirit’s baptism do not mention fire. Only Matthew and Luke mention the baptism of fire at the same time they mention the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus spoke of the baptism of the Holy Spirit to the disciples just prior to its coming, He made no mention of fire. “For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence [from now]” ([Acts 1:5](#)). John spoke of “he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” ([John 1:33](#)) but in that passage said nothing about fire. The same is true in Mark. “I indeed have baptized you with water; but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost” ([Mark 1:8](#)). The only time the baptism of fire is mentioned is in the context of parallel illustrations of blessings and judgment.

3. His Work and the Lamb of God

Never did John speak more clearly or more beautifully of Christ's redemptive ministry than when he spoke the most famous of all his declarations, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" ([John 1:29](#)). From this great Gospel statement by John the Baptist, we note three important truths about Christ's work as the Lamb of God: the cleansing by the Lamb, the providing of the Lamb, and the suffering of the Lamb.

The cleansing by the Lamb. John said the Lamb "taketh away the sin of the world." This is the main reason Christ came to earth the first time. He was indeed the greatest teacher, prophet, leader, and example man has ever had. But His greatest work and His main work for man in His first coming was redemption. We can be extremely glad that this is so, for man's greatest need is to have his sin taken away. Sin ruins, defiles, destroys, and deadens in this life; and it damns to eternal hell in the next life. Sin is what alienates us from God and brings us under the anathema of God.

John's ministry endeavored to bring people to a proper awareness of their sinfulness so that they would readily recognize their great need of Christ, the Lamb of God, Who could take away their sin. Much of Israel, however, did not think their great need was to have their sins taken away. They viewed their needs in terms of political, material, cultural, and physical well being. They wanted a Lion ([Revelation 5:5](#)), not a Lamb. Times have not changed. Christ in the manger is more popular than Christ on the cross. Christ as a teacher, example, leader, and a revolutionists (as some radicals like to picture Him) is more popular than Christ the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. "But you may have high education, beautiful refinement of culture and manners; you may divide out political power in accordance with the most democratic notions; you may give everybody 'a living wage,' however extravagant his notions of a living wage may be. You may carry out all these panaceas and the world will groan still, because you have not dealt with the tap-root of all the mischief. You cannot cure an internal cancer with a plaster upon the little finger, and you will never stanch the world's wounds until you go to the Physician that has balm and bandage, even Jesus Christ, that takes away the sins of the world" (Maclaren).

"Taketh away the sin of the world" states three important truths about the Lamb in His work of saving men from their sins.

First, *He is needed by all men.* Saying the Lamb takes away the sin of the "world" means that all the world needs the Lamb. This Lamb was not just for Israel. It was for everyone, for everyone needs Him.

Second, *He can save all men.* He is able to take away "the sin of the world," not just the sin of a few. No sin is too great or too much for the Lamb to cleanse. Christ can save any sinner who comes to Him for salvation.

Third, *He alone can save men.* This is the only lamb that is ever said to take away the sin of the world. John's statement allows no room for other lambs or other saviors. This is *the* Lamb which takes away the sin of the world. "There is one God, and one mediator between

God and men, the man Christ Jesus” ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)). “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” ([Acts 4:12](#)). “For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” ([1 Corinthians 3:11](#)). It is not Mary, Joseph Smith, Mohammed, Buddha, or any other person that can save. Only Christ can take away man’s sin.

The providing of the Lamb. God provided the Lamb, for the Lamb is called “the Lamb of God.” Man could not provide the Lamb. Man cannot save himself. He has tried a host of ways to save himself, but all these ways only emphasize his inability to do so. Therefore, someone else must save man. Someone else must provide the Lamb Who can take away man’s sin. And God graciously did provide His Son as the Lamb to die and shed His blood to cleanse us of our sins.

“Behold, the Lamb of God” answers more fully a question that was asked many centuries before by Isaac. Abraham had taken Isaac to Moriah, as instructed by God, to offer a sacrifice unto the Lord. When they had arrived at the place, Isaac took inventory and realized the lamb was missing. He said, “My father . . . Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ([Genesis 22:7](#)). Abraham answered, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering” ([Genesis 22:8](#)). God did indeed provide the lamb for Abraham ([Genesis 22:13](#)), and Abraham was so impressed by the providing of the lamb that he called the place “Jehovah-jireh” ([Genesis 22:14](#)) which means the Lord will provide.

Abraham’s answer to Isaac not only spoke of the provision of a lamb for their immediate situation, but it also spoke in a threefold way of the provision of Jesus Christ, The Lamb, of which John spoke. First, the Lamb was provided *by* God. “God will provide . . . a lamb.” Second, it was provided *for* God. “God will provide [for] himself a lamb” (some Hebrew scholars believe the sentence should be translated with the “for” in it). Sinners need a Lamb to take away their sin, but God also needed a Lamb so He could be just in justifying the sinner. Third, it was provided *in* God. “God will provide himself” as the Lamb. The Lamb was God Himself. The Deity of Jesus Christ is seen here. Abraham’s answer only intimated about the Greater Lamb, but John the Baptist’s statement plainly pointed Him out to mankind.

The suffering of the Lamb. In describing Jesus as the “Lamb of God,” John the Baptist indicated that Jesus Christ would suffer as a sacrifice for our sins. The Jews would know there was suffering in the “Lamb” designation, for this was sacrifice language, and the Jews were well acquainted with sacrifices. In Jewish ceremony the lamb was placed on the altar and slain.

The “Lamb” designation would remind them of the daily offering of a lamb made morning and evening on the altar as instructed to do in [Exodus 29:38–42](#). The “Lamb” designation would also remind them of the paschal lamb which was sacrificed the first time

in Egypt to protect them from the death angel. Few Old Testament texts are as filled with Gospel truths as the Exodus 12 account of the Passover in which the Lamb speaks in so many ways of Christ and His sacrificial work on the cross, shedding His blood for our sins. Yes, Christ was “the Lamb that was slain” ([Revelation 5:12](#)) for the sins of the world. The “Lamb” description predicted Calvary and Christ’s suffering for our sins.

In this best known statement of John the Baptist, he gave great testimony of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. And the remarkable thing about this testimony is that it was made before Calvary. The apostles gave great testimony of Christ and His sacrifice for sins after Calvary and the resurrection. But John gave his great testimony of the sacrifice of Christ before it happened. He was truly a great preacher of the Gospel.

C. THE WORSHIP OF CHRIST

John the Baptist bowed low before Jesus Christ in his worship of Him. This is seen in his doctrine of Christ, his devotion to Christ, and his deference to Christ.

1. His Doctrine of Christ

What one believes about Jesus Christ will certainly affect how one worships Christ. What John believed about Christ helps us understand why he worshipped Christ so well. John’s high and holy view of Christ is seen in three things he said about Him: the superiority of Christ, the pre-existence of Christ, and the Sonship of Christ.

The superiority of Christ. Repeatedly John the Baptist stressed that Christ was superior to himself. All three Synoptic Gospels report his statements to the crowds in which he said Christ was “mightier than I” ([Matthew 3:11](#); [Mark 1:7](#); [Luke 3:16](#)) and that he was “not worthy” (Ibid.) to unloose and remove the shoes of Christ. “Mightier than I” meant a great deal then, for John was at that time very popular and considered very great by the people. To be mightier than John was to really be somebody. And for a mighty man like John to say he was unworthy to remove the shoes from Christ’s feet only added to the superiority of Christ over John. Removing the shoes from one’s master and washing his feet was one of the very lowest tasks of a servant in those days. Yet John, in great recognition of the greatness of Christ said that he was “not worthy” to do even this lowly task for Christ.

The Gospel of John also records similar statements of John the Baptist in which he exalts Christ far above himself: “He that cometh after me is preferred before me” ([John 1:15](#)), “After me cometh a man which is preferred before me” ([John 1:30](#)), and “I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him [as a forerunner-hence the herald in contrast to the King]” ([John 3:28](#)). All of this recognition of Christ’s superiority to John accents the fact that John viewed Christ extremely high. And we all ought to view Christ likewise. Failure to do this will hinder our worship of Him, our relationship to Him, and our fellowship with Him.

The pre-existence of Christ. In two verses from the Gospel of John, we have the testimony of John the Baptist which proclaims the pre-existence of Jesus Christ. In both of these verses, he is recorded as saying of Christ, “he was before me” ([John 1:15,30](#)). John was born six months before Christ ([Luke 1:36](#)) so how could Christ be “before” John chronologically? The answer is that Christ was God and existed before His coming to earth.

Christ used the same language when He was quizzed down by His rejectors. “Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am” ([John 8:57,58](#)). To confess the pre-existence of Christ as John the Baptist did was a testimony of the Deity of Christ, and to believe that Jesus is God is essential to acceptable worship of Christ.

The Sonship of Christ. Another testimony of the Deity of Christ is given by John when he said, “I saw, and bare record [witness] that this is the Son of God” ([John 1:34](#)). The term “the Son of God” (not “a” son of God but “the” Son of God—there is a big difference) is a term indicating Deity. Jesus Christ is indeed *the* Son of God. He is God manifested in the form of flesh. John the Baptist believed that great truth and confessed it unashamedly and outspokenly.

Again we emphasize that to believe that Christ is God will promote the worship of Christ. A good many folk, however, do not believe in the Deity of Christ and therefore do not worship Christ well at all. In fact, some apostate ministers have gone so far as to depict the worship of Christ as a perilous act. As an example, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a popular but very apostate minister of a previous generation, wrote a book entitled *The Hope of the World* in which he had a sermon entitled “The Peril of Worshipping Jesus.” Quite a strange and ludicrous combination—hope of the world and peril of worshipping Christ. But when one’s view of Jesus Christ is as defective as Fosdick’s, that is the sort of theology one will advance. John the Baptist in great contrast makes a much holier and proper confession. God called John the Baptist “great.” Fosdick and his kind are nothing of the sort.

2. His Devotion to Christ

John the Baptist was very devoted to Christ. This is seen throughout the Scriptures about John. We especially note it in a statement he made which is recorded in [John 3:29](#). “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.” There are three manifestations of John’s devotion in this verse: they are standing (“standeth”), listening (“heareth him”), and rejoicing (“rejoiceth . . . my joy . . . is fulfilled”).

Standing. Standing for someone denotes respect. Devotion fosters respect. John stood in respect of Jesus Christ, here spoken of as the bridegroom in our text. The picture is that of an honored one coming into the midst of a gathering and out of respect to him people stand. The problem today is that we are standing for the wrong people. We give much honor and respect to those who do not deserve it and little honor and respect to those who do deserve

it. Especially do we not stand for God and for holy men of God. When famous, but wicked, men (such as corrupt politicians or star athletes) walk into our presence, we too often jump to our feet. But when the godly walk into our midst, we seldom pay attention; and if we do try to honor God and godliness, our courts will often reprimand us and tell us we cannot stand for God and godliness in some of our public places.

Listening. John the Baptist was attentive to every word Christ had to say. John said he was “the friend of the bridegroom, who . . . heareth him.” We listen to those to whom we are devoted. A boy writes a girl who is greatly in love with the boy. She reads every word of his letter with keen interest because of her great devotion to the boy. Those who are in love with Jesus Christ will listen to Him speak. They will earnestly pursue the Word of God. They will listen attentively as His Word is preached. Disinterest in the Word, in the preaching and teaching of the Word only reflects the lack of devotion of the disinterested one.

Rejoicing. We give away our heart by what we rejoice in and what we do not rejoice in. John “rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice”; so great that he added, “This my joy therefore is fulfilled.” Delight and devotion go hand in hand. John really delighted in Jesus Christ. His language here is doubtless a foreign tongue to most folk, even to most professing believers; for not many folk, not even many professing saints, are this taken up with Christ to where their greatest joys will be found in Him and His Word. You will not find many in any church that even come close to this sort of delight in the things of Christ. In fact, a good many of the ministers do not even have this interest for Christ. What great devotion John had for Christ, a devotion which greatly promoted his worship of Him. Little devotion means little worship (which explains a lot of absenteeism at church); great devotion means much worship.

3. His Deference to Christ

Jesus Christ had first place in John’s life. Nothing said this better about John than his statement, “He must increase, but I must decrease” ([John 3:30](#)). That summed up what he had been saying all along about Christ being mightier than John and being preferred before John. This statement “He must increase, but I must decrease” was made as a result of a report given to John by some of his disciples that said, “All men come to him [Christ]” ([John 3:26](#)). This meant that John’s crowd was diminishing, and Christ was the main attraction now. Most men would get envious and highly upset over such a turn of events. But, in contrast, John responded, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” John’s desire was for Christ to be pre-eminent. He practiced what the Apostle Paul later wrote about to the church at Colosse: “That in all things he might have the pre-eminence” ([Colossians 1:18](#)).

One of the great problems of man is here—man is too often ego-centric when he needs to be Christo-centric. “For me to live is Christ” ([Philippians 1:21](#)) is what we must practice if life is to be lived successfully in God’s sight. John said it was to be less of self and more

of the Savior. It is not we who need to be honored and glorified, but it is the Savior Who is to be honored and glorified. To exalt the Savior properly, we must, however, walk humbly before Him. Does this humbling before the Savior bother you? If it does, remember that though you must be humbled and abased in order for Christ to be glorified, Christ had to humble and abase Himself oh so much more in order that you might be glorified as a redeemed soul in heaven.

True worship will not occur until we have the right doctrine about Christ, much devotion for Christ, and practice deference to Christ. John did extremely well in all three areas; and, therefore, he worshipped well. How excellent did John speak of Christ. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, how a person speaks of Christ will tell us much about the character of that person and his ministry. Now after we have examined how John the Baptist spoke about Christ, we can only conclude that John was indeed a tremendous man of God. He was what the angel Gabriel said of him. “He shall be great in the sight of the Lord” ([Luke 1:15](#)).

VII. BELIEVERS

[MATTHEW 9:14, 21:32](#); [LUKE 11:1](#); [JOHN 1:35-37](#)

EVERY PROMINENT MAN has a following of some sort. Politicians have their devotees; radio, TV, and entertainment stars have their loyal fans; and every pastor has those who are especially supportive of him. John the Baptist was no exception, for he also had those who followed and believed him. In this chapter we want to examine the group that believed John the Baptist. We want to see who those people were and to see how John influenced them. They were not a large group, for those who follow the truth seldom comprise a great multitude. John had large crowds at times; but we are not looking here at his crowds; we are looking rather at his converts, at those who believed him.

It is not easy to find out about the people who followed John the Baptist, for we have only a few scattered verses in the Gospels which will enlighten us. But though not much is said in the Scripture about John’s true disciples, enough is said, however, to tell us some good things about John’s character and his ministry.

In our study of those who believed John the Baptist, we will consider the lowliness of his followers and the learning of his followers. This will show us the type of people who followed John and what John taught his followers.

A. THE LOWLINESS OF HIS FOLLOWERS

John’s followers were not comprised of those rich in earthly goods or the famous and powerful in society. The bulk of John’s followers came from those who were lowly in calling

or were lowly in character.

By *lowly in calling* we mean “blue collar” jobs (to use present day terminology), not prestigious, glamorous, highly respected positions which gave status in the world. As an example, we learn from John’s Gospel that some of his best disciples were fishermen. John, the author of the Gospel, and Andrew, the brother of Peter, two of John’s “disciples” ([John 1:35](#)) were fisherman ([Mark 1:16–19](#)). Fishing will obviously be considered a “blue collar” job. It was not celebrity work but would be considered a low calling in comparison to jobs of more status and prestige in society, such as, lawyers, rulers, and doctors.

By *lowly in character* we mean those who before they were changed in character through John’s ministry lived most unholy lives and were a despised lot in society because of their wickedness. In a passage rebuking the unbelief of the religious leaders, Christ spoke of this group when He said, “For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans [tax collectors] and the harlots believed him; and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him” ([Matthew 21:32](#)). Tax collectors, who we looked at in a previous chapter, were cruel, greedy men who overcharged people in taxes. They were a very hated group. These Jews were considered traitors to their own people, for they were collecting taxes from their own people to help support the oppressive Roman occupation of the land. Harlots were also justifiably viewed as gross sinners because of their terrible immoral lifestyle in which they ruined the lives and morals of many in order to make money.

So the followers of John the Baptist came from a lowly segment of society—both in work and in waywardness. His followers did not include many, if any, from the upper class of society. In examining this lowly composition of John’s crowd, we will note the expectation of it, the explanation for it, and the exhortation from it.

1. The Expectation of This Composition

That John’s followers should be composed of this type of crowd should not be a surprise to the student of the Word of God and to one who observes the composition of the faithful in our churches. Christ said, “Verily I say unto you, That the publicans [tax collectors] and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you” ([Matthew 21:31](#)). The “you” included the religious leaders, those with high and esteemed position in society. The Apostle Paul said, “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” ([1 Corinthians 1:26](#)). Some years ago an English speaking queen of one of the European countries emphasized the truth of Paul’s text when she gave a short personal testimony in a group of believers. She said, “I thank God for the letter ‘m.’” This puzzled the group, and so they asked the queen what she meant by her testimony. She replied that if it were not for the letter “m” she would not be saved. Then she quoted Paul’s text and said that without “m” it would say, “Not any noble are called.”

True, it is not “any”; but it is also “not many.” It is the lowly in society who comprise the largest segment of the disciples of truth. It has always been this way. Few and far between

are the prestigious and important persons of society in the camp of the faithful. A true minister of God will always testify to the fact that his main response comes not from the intellectuals, the professionally pious, the ones in high position in society; but his best response comes from the commoners and from those whose lives have been much soiled with sin. He will tell you that the polite and polished church attender will be much harder to penetrate with the Gospel than the obvious sinner.

In the 1960s, John D. Jess, founder of and at that time still the speaker on the “Chapel of the Air” radio broadcast, announced he was going to change his messages and direct them to the intellectual crowd. It was a disappointing announcement—not because the intellectual crowd does not need the Gospel, but because it reflected an attitude that is not supported by Scripture. Jess had a good program in his early years, and his ministry greatly helped the common folk. But he decided to try to appeal to the intellectual group. Later in the 1970s, however, he made an announcement that he was reversing himself and going back to the common folk in his message. His announcement was an admission of the futility of aiming solely at the high and mighty. His announcement verified the truth about the composition of the followers of John the Baptist and also of Jesus Christ and any true minister and church.

2. The Explanation for This Composition

Why is it that so few of the great and mighty do not respond well to spiritual truth? As great as John the Baptist was, as logical and sound and wholesome as his message was, you would think that the high and mighty would recognize wisdom and bow down to it quickly. In fact, you would think those in high positions and those who seemed to be the wise men of the world would be first to recognize the excellency of John’s ministry. But that is seldom, if ever, the case. The reason for this is that pride gets in the way. Few things promote rejection of spiritual truth as forcefully as pride. And those in high position are rarely without a great deal of fleshly pride.

Paul explains this well regarding why “not many” of the wise men, mighty, and noble of society believe. He said, “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, *That no flesh should glory in his presence*” ([1 Corinthians 1:27–29](#)).

The high and mighty of this world are extremely interested in the glorifying of the flesh. They live and die on press reports, on their ratings, on their popularity, and on their recognition by various groups and organizations. But God’s work is in the business of giving glory to God and not to men. Hence, a ministry and message, such as that of John the Baptist, that does not exalt men will not appeal to those who want to be exalted. Such a ministry, however, will not bother the humble. Lacking pride, the lowly crowd will be more responsive to the message of God. They will be more ready to acknowledge their sinfulness and seek relief from God.

Matthew Poole states this truth well when he says, “It is a hard thing to convince a moral righteous, civil man, that he lacks anything to salvation; and hence it is that profane persons many times repent, believe, and are saved, when others perish in their impenitency and unbelief, because they think they have no need of repentance, or any further righteousness than they are possessed of.” The high and mighty in society are seldom of the mind to admit their great sinfulness. They will admit—if it is advantageous to do so—that they are not perfect and have made some mistakes in the past, etc. But to admit they are a wretched sinner in God’s sight is much more than their pride can stomach. They think themselves to be quite good people. After all, they are the elite of society; so they think that must say something about their goodness. Such always have a very hard time perceiving their wretchedness. They see the wickedness of the tax collectors and harlots but cannot see themselves before God as needing salvation just as much as the tax collectors and harlots need it.

3. The Exhortation from This Composition

The composition of the faithful followers of John the Baptist will instruct us in several important ways. We particularly notice here that it condemns the proud, commends the Gospel, and cautions the church.

It condemns the proud. There is no question that the proud are condemned by the fact that the down and outers respond better to the truth than they do, for this is the primary lesson Christ taught in [Matthew 21:31](#) from this fact. “He shamed them by the example of the publicans and harlots, who believed John . . . but the lesson of whose reformation was lost upon them” (J. A. MacDonald). The proud religious leaders did not evidence the wisdom of the lowly sinners in believing the excellent ministry of John the Baptist. And to make matters worse, they did not believe even after they saw the reformation of those gross sinners after they believed. It is a great indictment upon the proud for their stubborn and inexcusable unbelief.

It commends the Gospel. The saving work of the Gospel excludes no one except those who will not repent and receive the Gospel. It matters not how vile a person has been, what matters is whether or not he repents and receives Christ. The glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ is able to transform the lives of the worst of sinners. In John the Baptist’s ministry and in the ministry of Jesus Christ, this fact was proven repeatedly. The worst of society—the despised tax collectors and the harlots—were transformed by the saving power of the Gospel. The hope of the world is bound up in the Gospel, not in any other remedy; for it alone can give any man what he needs the most.

It cautions the church. The composition of John’s followers cautions the church in two ways. First, it cautions the church to not be discouraged when it is not accepted by the high and mighty of this world. The success of the church is not determined by how well received it is

by those in high position and esteem of the world. The church is generally scorned by that crowd just as John the Baptist and Christ were. Second, it cautions the church to not be deceived into a celebrity-emphasis program. In our day we have seen a number of churches and Christian organizations obsessed with bringing celebrities into the church and parading them across the rostrum to say a good word for the Lord. They are forever advertising that this and that celebrity will be in church on Sunday, and they seem addicted to insisting on having the mayor or prominent city councilman or congressman in special services to say a word of greeting. This emphasis on the famous in society is a frequent promotional gimmick of many of our fundamental churches, and it needs to be rebuked. We do not need the testimony of a famous person in society to validate the Gospel. The fact that great sinners believed and their lives were transformed is ample testimony of the power of the Gospel. Trying to impress people with the Gospel by the fact that big shots believe it (or at least will show up in your service to give worldly prestige to your crowd) is not a philosophy advocated by the Word of God. It is only a habit of the flesh that wants the esteem of men.

B. THE LEARNING OF HIS FOLLOWERS

Those who faithfully followed John the Baptist would not be ignorant of important spiritual principles. They were taught well by exhortation and example. We glean from Scripture three important things which John the Baptist taught his disciples. He taught them about supplication, about self-denial, and about salvation. Prayer, fasting, and the Lamb of God were three courses John's followers would learn well. John doubtless taught his disciples other important truths, but these three truths are at the top of the list in learning. Nothing is so important as salvation; and then after salvation, it is very important that we practice self-denial and prayer.

1. Supplication

One verse in the Gospel of Luke informs us that John taught his disciples to pray. "Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples" ([Luke 11:1](#)). It is an enlightening fact about John's ministry that his teaching his followers to pray was well known by others.

The idea that one needs to be taught to pray is emphasized in this work of John teaching his disciples to pray. Few, however, think in terms of needing to be schooled in the practice of prayer. Most folk seem to think that prayer sort of grows on one as he becomes more religious. But many, including some who are outwardly very religious people, do not pray well either in habit or in style, and this evidences the great need for teaching about prayer.

There is a twofold teaching here: one is taught to pray, and one is taught how to pray.

Taught to pray. The first teaching that we need is simply to pray. The flesh is not prone to pray for at least three reasons: first, it is not prone to pray because of disinterest in spiritual exercise. Second, it is not prone to pray because it does not feel the need of God. And third, it is not prone to pray because it does not think God can help. Just about any case of

prayerlessness can be attributed to one or more of these three reasons. All of this says that men really need to be taught the necessity of prayer. It is a duty and a need in everyone's life. "Men ought always to pray" ([Luke 18:1](#)). And it is not vain to pray. Prayer does indeed change things.

Taught how to pray. The second teaching that we need is in how to pray. To whom do we pray, for what do we pray, when do we pray, and in what way do we pray are just a few areas in which we all need Biblical instruction. We need to be taught to pray according to the will of God, to pray about everything, to pray frequently, and to pray earnestly. The school of prayer is not learned overnight, and much instruction is necessary if we are to cultivate a productive prayer life. Anyone with any spiritual sense at all will quickly admit they can always learn more about prayer.

So John is to be commended that he instructed his disciples in the matter of prayer. It was a most needed subject for him to teach. But few would teach it, especially hirelings; for they are not interested in the spiritual welfare of their followers but only in how their followers can help them gain more worldly fame and honor. In teaching his disciples to pray, John displayed the integrity of his ministry. He was no hireling; he was no hypocrite. Rather he was a thoroughly genuine man of God.

2. Self-denial

John's teaching in the area of self-denial is evidenced by his teaching his disciples to fast. That his disciples were taught by him to fast is learned through an indirect reference to it in the Scriptures. All three Gospels record the incident in which some disciples of John came to Christ and asked, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not?" ([Matthew 9:14](#), cp. [Mark 2:18](#) and [Luke 5:33](#)). We are not surprised that John would instruct his disciples in this exercise. Fasting involved self-denial, and John the Baptist was a superb example of self-denial. His living in the wilderness on locusts and wild honey demonstrated that fact.

Fasting is abstinence from that which is legitimate in order to enhance one's spiritual pursuits. We can fast in more things than food, but food is generally the primary thing associated with fasting. In principle it is making the appetites of the body subservient to one's spiritual needs. We certainly do not see much of that in this day and age in which the appetites of the flesh are nearly deified and self-denial is scorned.

There will be no need of fasting, of course, when we are in the presence of Christ. That was the answer Christ gave to the question asked in the above texts. "And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom [Christ] is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days" ([Mark 2:19,20](#)).

The fact that the Pharisees put great emphasis on fasting must not be allowed here to

taint the teaching of John about fasting. The Pharisees were hypocrites through and through, but John was nothing of the sort; so his teaching and practice regarding fasting would be far different than the Pharisees. The purpose and motivation in the fasting of John's disciples in comparison to the Pharisees was as different as day and night. The only similarity in the two is that they both fasted.

3. Salvation

The zenith of all of John's teaching was his teaching about soul salvation. Scripture gives us a beautiful picture of his leading several of his disciples to Jesus Christ. "Again the next day after, John stood, and two of his disciples; And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God! And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus" ([John 1:35-37](#)).

John's great teaching regarding Jesus Christ was that He was "The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" ([John 1:29](#)). We looked at this message of John in our last chapter. Here we see him repeating the truth to two of his followers who heeded his teaching and followed Christ. The two disciples, as we noted earlier, were John, the author of the Gospel of John, and Andrew, the brother of Peter.

In teaching his disciples about salvation, John exhibited both a good example as a teacher and a good exhortation from a teacher.

The example. The best kind of teacher is one who lives a noble life and therefore lives what he teaches. In pointing his disciples to the Lamb of God in his teaching, John the Baptist is described in two gallant terms.

First, it is said in our text that "John stood." The original in the Greek emphasizes the continuous standing of John. This gives us a great picture of John's performance. He "stood" faithfully for Divine truth at all times. Though circumstances changed, he continued to stand faithfully. John "stood" when he was an unknown beginning his ministry; he stood when he was popular; he stood when he was persecuted; he stood when he was rejected; he stood when results were few; he stood when he lost his crowd; and he stood when he was put in prison. Too much Christianity today sits and compromises. But John stood faithfully for Divine truth. He stood faithfully for Jesus Christ. And no one stands better, straighter, more nobly, or with more dignity than he who stands for Christ. "John stood" would be a great epithet to put on John's tombstone.

Second, his character is also emphasized in "looking upon Jesus as he walked" ([v. 36](#)). "Looking" is translated from a Greek verb which means an earnest, intense looking at something. Godet says the word means "a penetrating look which searches its object to its depths." Barnes elaborates and says of the action of John the Baptist, "Fixing his eyes intently upon him. Singling him out and regarding him with special attention. Contemplating him as the long-expected Messiah and Deliverer of the world. In this way should all ministers fix their eye on the Son of God, and direct all others to him." Many

ministers try teaching and preaching about Christ, but they are not looking at Him. They do not contemplate Him with the devotion that John the Baptist did. A good teacher will show enthusiasm for what He is teaching, and no teacher showed more enthusiasm for Jesus Christ than John the Baptist.

The exhortation. The summary of John's teaching about salvation is found in "Behold the Lamb of God." The exhortation emphasizes both the deliverance by the Lamb and devotion to the Lamb.

First, the exhortation emphasizes the deliverance the Lamb can give from our sins. Deliverance from our sins is what the Lamb is all about. As we noted in our last chapter in looking at the message of the Lamb of God, sacrifice for sins was understood by the term "Lamb of God." John emphasized the redemptive work of Christ above all other works of Christ. It is the work man needs the most. It is the teaching man needs most.

Second, the phrase, "Behold the Lamb of God" also suggests devotion to the Lamb. That is, it is an exhortation to Behold the Lord Jesus Christ, to keep one's eyes fixed upon Him. John first said, "Behold" here is the One Who can deliver you from your sins. Then, secondly, he says, "Behold" Him with great devotion. John demonstrated this second "Behold" practice to his disciples in his "looking" at Jesus. John evidenced great devotion and great delight in Christ in the way he looked at Him. The writer of Hebrews spoke similarly when he says that in order to have a victorious life we need to be "Looking unto Jesus" ([Hebrews 12:2](#)). "Looking" in this text is from a different Greek word than "looking" used with John the Baptist, but they both carry the idea of focusing our affections and interest upon Jesus Christ.

The followers of John were a very privileged group. How wise it was of them to believe what he had to say. The tragedy is that so many did not believe John but instead turned away from him and even scornfully challenged him. We will take a look in our next chapter at that group of scorners who did not believe in John the Baptist.

VIII. BELLIGERENTS

[LUKE 7:30](#), [20:4-7](#); [JOHN 1:19-28](#)

THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS of Israel did not respond well to the ministry of John the Baptist. That should not be a surprise, however; for they and John were of vastly different character and going in two distinctly different directions. John was genuine, godly, humble, and lived a spartan life. They were hypocrites, unholy, puffed up with pride, and lived luxuriously. Their rejection of John's ministry was not passive. It was aggressively hostile. But it was subtle hostility, for John was too popular with the people for these religious leaders to be

overt in their opposition to him.

These religious leaders who were belligerent in their attitude towards John and his ministry were comprised particularly of Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and priests. It also included the Sanhedrin, the body of seventy (some think seventy-one) Jewish leaders composed mostly of religious leaders (such as Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and priests) plus some “elders” of the land. The Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish ruling group that claimed its origin in the seventy elders Moses appointed to help him ([Numbers 11:16,17](#)), was accorded some authority by the Roman government. It is best known for the gross injustice it practiced in the trial of Jesus Christ. In New Testament times, this group “sat at Jerusalem, and was the representative of the Jewish [religion] . . . who took cognizance of all matters relating to religion” (Matthew Henry).

We want to look in this chapter at this group of belligerents and note their actions in regards to John the Baptist. To do this we will examine the indictment of the belligerents about their rejection of John, the interrogation by the belligerents of John, and the indecision in the belligerents about the authority of John’s baptism.

A. THE INDICTMENT OF THE BELLIGERENTS

The first look we will have in this chapter of these spiritual belligerents will be a look at their Divine indictment for rejecting John’s ministry. We will especially look at the indictment given in [Luke 7:30](#) which is an excellent capsule summary of the belligerents’ rejection of John. It says, “But the Pharisees and lawyers [interpreters of Mosaic law and generally considered the same as the scribes] rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.” This indictment, which is not limited to just Pharisees and scribes but must be considered to speak of the whole religious group composed of Pharisees, scribes, Sanhedrin, etc., is twofold: they rejected the counsel of God, and they refused the baptism of John. These two actions are inseparably related. You reject the counsel of God, and you will refuse the baptism of John. You refuse the baptism of John, and you are rejecting the counsel of God.

1. They Rejected the Counsel of God

This counsel of God for these religious leaders was made known by John’s message—a message which was given to more than just these leaders, of course. John’s message constituted God’s counsel, for John spoke as he was directed by God. However, these religious leaders paid no attention to it but rejected it and turned away from it. As Bishop Ryle said, “In short they fulfilled to the letter the words of Solomon, ‘Ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would [have] none of my reproof’ ([Proverbs 1:25](#)).”

We will note the seriousness, the aggressiveness, the unexpectedness, and the foolishness of this rejection.

The seriousness of this rejection. The word translated “counsel” here not only involves the

idea of advice but also of purpose and intent. The counsel God had for these people was to repent of their sins and be baptized by John. It was God's intent and desire that they do this. Therefore, to reject God's counsel is to disobey God. God's counsel is not just another piece of advice that you weigh along with other advice to see which is best to do. God's counsel just happens to be God's commands, too. To reject His counsel is to rebel against Him. This is no trivial deed. It is a serious offense against God.

The aggressiveness of this rejection. As we noted in our introduction, this rejection of God's counsel was not a passive rejection. Rather, it was very aggressive as is seen throughout the Gospels in regards to the belligerents' actions towards John and later towards Jesus Christ. In rejecting God's counsel, they not only sneered at it, but they also viciously attacked it. It was truly a belligerent attitude that characterized their rejection.

The unexpectedness of this rejection. We seldom think of religious folk being so adamantly opposed to God's counsel. We normally think that such outspoken rejection comes from the wretched smelling and behaving sinner on skid row. Tell us those bums sneer at God, and we believe it without difficulty. But tell us that the outwardly pious and religious folk do it, too; and we have a hard time believing it. However, the truth of the matter is that folk who are very religious and in high positions in church are not immune from rejecting God's counsel. No one is—no position, race, background, or calling is. We must ever be alert to rebellion that lurks in our heart lest it be allowed to grow and display itself in God dishonoring ways.

The foolishness of this rejection. It is a terrible indictment to be hung around one's neck that he rejected the counsel of God. Reject anyone else's counsel if you will, but never reject God's counsel. No one is a greater fool than he who spurns the counsel of God. But today men are prone to play the fool. They will listen to counsel and advice coming at them from every direction except from God. Newspaper columnists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other professional counsellors whose advice is fraught with spiritual and moral stupidity will be heeded and praised by the world while the Divine Word of God will be despised and laughed at and viewed as antiquated, impractical, nonsensical, and injurious. But God's counsel is not out of date, impractical, or unwise. Neither is it injurious—to the contrary, God only counsels us to bring blessing into our lives, not a curse. All God's counsel needs to be viewed as for our good, not for our evil. Sometimes His counsel crosses our will, and we think it will take away happiness and other good things. Satan loves to harp on that idea. He started that in the Garden of Eden. He implied to Eve that God was by His Word keeping her and Adam from good things. But that was a lie then and is still a lie now. So abide by the Word of God. It is for your good—which means it is only great folly to reject the Word of God.

2. They Refused the Baptism of John

John baptized many folk, but he did not baptize any of these belligerents, for they adamantly refused to be baptized by him. We note three things from their refusal to be baptized by John: the revelation in the refusal, the reason for the refusal, and the result of the refusal.

The revelation in the refusal. The outward evidence of the inward rejection of God's counsel in these folks' lives was seen in their refusal to be baptized by John. The rejection was first in the heart; then it came out in their conduct. This is always so. Our conduct only reveals what goes on in our heart. If there is unbelief in the heart, sooner or later it will be manifested by disobedience to God's commands. Sooner or later we will give evidence of our unbelief by outward rebellion against God's ways. We may be ever so clever in concealing from others the unbelief that fills our heart, but eventually it will show some day in our conduct, and it will show very obviously as it did here with these belligerents in their refusing to be baptized by John—a refusal multitudes witnessed.

The reason for the refusal. We noted in a previous chapter that when these belligerents came to John for baptism, they came on their own terms, not John's. They wanted to be baptized but did not want to truly repent. John saw through their hypocrisy and demanded that they bring forth fruit to show the genuineness of their professed repentance. This they would not do. They were not about to change their ways. They did not want a religion that condemned their ways but one that countenanced their ways. So they refused to be “baptized by him.”

The result of the refusal. Refusing to be baptized by John helped lay the groundwork for the belligerents' animosity towards John. Since baptism by John was quite popular and respected then, and since they attempted to be baptized but were turned away as unrepentant sinners, their hearts would be stirred up against John. After all, they were exposed by John right in front of a multitude of people. This would really hurt their fleshly pride. They viewed themselves as the epitome of religiousness and holiness and wanted that esteem and respect from the people. But John exposed their evil hearts for what they truly were. When folk are exposed like that, they either get right with God; or they get mad at God's ministers. These belligerents chose the latter and evidenced it from then on in their animosity towards John. A lot of animosity by church members towards their pastor is of the same character. You simply cannot harbor stubborn unbelief in your heart without it sooner or later resulting in your getting upset with God's ministers.

B. THE INTERROGATION BY THE BELLIGERENTS

In the first chapter ([vv.19–28](#)) of the Gospel of John is a record of an interrogation of John the Baptist by these belligerents. This occurred shortly after Jesus Christ was baptized (cp. [John 1:19](#) with [John 1:29](#) and [1:35,36](#)). These belligerents sent a delegation from Jerusalem

to John to question him. The delegation, which was composed specifically of “priests and Levites” ([v. 19](#)), had officialdom to it; for it was sent by the Sanhedrin (“the Jews” [Ibid.]—”When the fourth Evangelist uses the word ‘Jews,’ he invariably means the Sanhedrin” [F. B. Meyer]).

The priests and Levites who comprised this delegation “were of the Pharisees” ([v. 24](#)). The Sanhedrin, as we have noted, was composed not only of Pharisees, but also of Sadducees, elders, and others. However, “The Pharisees were the ultra conservatives in Israel; no one could have been shocked more than they by the innovation which John the Baptist had taken . . . upon himself . . . in introducing baptism” (Godet). Of all the members of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees, therefore, were probably the most vehement in their dislike of John and consequently the most eager to quiz him down.

The interrogation by the belligerents did not discredit John as they had hoped. Rather, it revealed the superb character of John the Baptist and exposed their wicked animosity towards him. To further examine this result of the interrogation, we will look at the questions asked by the delegation and the answers given by John to the delegation.

1. The Questions

John was given a fivefold interrogation concerning his identity and his authority. Four questions were asked concerning his identity and one regarding his authority. The four questions concerning his identity were: first, was he Christ? ([vv. 19,20](#)); second, was he Elias [Elijah]? ([v. 21](#)); third, was he “that prophet?” ([v. 21](#))—a reference to the predicted prophet spoken of by Moses in [Deuteronomy 18:15](#) and [18](#); and fourth, a frustrated question concerning John’s identity, “What sayest thou of thyself?” ([v. 22](#)). The one question concerning authority was: “Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias [Elijah], neither that prophet?” ([v. 25](#)).

In our study of the questions asked by the delegation from the Sanhedrin, we will look at the ignorance of the questions, the interests of the questions, the insolence of the questions, and the intentions of the questions.

The ignorance of the questions. The asking of these questions revealed the ignorance of the great religious leaders of that day. This was an ignorance which really shamed them, for it was inexcusable ignorance. This group had the scrolls, the scribes, and the scholarship of the day; yet they were ignorant of the most important religious events going on in their time. Matthew Henry says, “One would think that they who were the fountains of learning, and the guides of [Jewish religion] . . . should have, by books, understood the times so well as to know that the Messiah was at hand, and therefore should presently have known him that was his forerunner, and readily embraced him; but instead of this, they sent messengers to cross questions with him.”

In three ways their inexcusable ignorance is very prominent in this interrogation. First, they did not know who John the Baptist was though John the Baptist was not an

unexplainable, puzzling person nor was his ministry a mystery. These Jewish leaders ought to have figured out that he fit his claim of [Isaiah 40](#) and [Malachi 3](#). Second, they showed their ignorance in that they thought “that prophet” of [Deuteronomy 18](#) (note [Acts 3:22ff](#)) was different than the Messiah. Third, they did not know Christ was in the midst. John pointed out in one of his answers that Christ was now walking in their midst, but “ye know not” ([v. 26](#)). Like Jacob of old, they could say, “The LORD is in this place; and I knew it not” ([Genesis 28:16](#)). What a spiritually dumb group. They who professed to be the wise men of the land were walking in the dark concerning the most important events of the day.

These religious belligerents are not alone in their inexcusable ignorance. Much of our land is like that today. Folk know a great deal about money, business, politics, sports scores, and superstition; but they know precious little about the most important matters in life. Let the experts talk in these spiritual areas, and they are like babes babbling in a nursery. As Matthew Henry says, “Secular learning, honor, and power seldom dispose men’s minds to the reception of Divine light.”

Sad to say, this ignorance is not only found in the secular world today, but it is also found all too often in our fundamental, Bible-believing churches. One reason for this ignorance is that our churches have gotten so taken up with entertainment in trying to attract a crowd and keep a crowd that they have put educating and edifying in spiritual matters on the back burner. Go into many Sunday School classes today and you will see them so busy sipping coffee and eating donuts (or in the younger classes—having refreshments) that they hardly get any real thorough Bible study done. So spiritual ignorance prevails. People are asking questions they should have known the answers to a long time ago.

The interests of the questions. The questions revealed what the delegation and the Sanhedrin who sent them were really interested in. They were not interested in important spiritual truth that could benefit their soul and improve their conduct. When John spoke of Christ in verses [John 1:26](#) and [John 1:27](#), they evidenced no interest whatsoever. Even though he spoke of Christ being right in their midst, they were unmoved.

Then what were they interested in? They were interested in authority—would John conform to them or was he a competitor? They also were interested in public esteem—John had become respected by the crowds and this was too much for them. He was getting the attention they wanted. So they must do something to whittle John down to size. By the interrogation they hoped to take the wind out of John’s sails and restore public esteem back to themselves. So John could talk all he wanted about Christ, but they would pay no attention. He could quote Scripture about his own calling, but that did not interest them either. Their interests were primarily in matters which concerned their own exaltation—such as position, authority, public esteem, etc. They did not use their position and power to guide the people in the ways of truth and righteousness, but they used their position for their own personal gain.

There are some in our churches who manifest the same kind of interest as these

belligerents. They are chiefly interested in the exalting of themselves in the church. They are not interested in the message, in spiritual matters, or in promoting the work of God. Church elections, who gets on important committees, who becomes chairman of various groups and boards, and who has the most authority and say in church decisions is their main interest at church. Talk to them about the Word, about Christ, about important spiritual matters, about advancing the work of the Lord, and they feign an interest at best. They are carnal from the top of their head to the tip of their toes and reflect it by their interests. It is a pitiful condition to be in. Furthermore, their condition is a great problem to the church, for these kind of folk are major trouble makers at church—just like the belligerents in John’s day.

The insolence of the questions. Two questions especially emphasize this attitude of the interrogators. “Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us” (v. 22) and “Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias [Elijah], neither that prophet?” (v. 25).

First, the question “Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us” let John know that they represented authority which he ought to pay deference to. They had been sent by the almighty Sanhedrin; and, therefore, he had better give them an answer as to who he is so they can report back to the Sanhedrin. The implication in their statement in [verse 22](#) is that John is obligated to answer their questions. This is an official inquiry, and he is duty bound to respond to their questions, for they represent great authority and are reporting back to the Sanhedrin—the religious authority of the land. So they insult John by treating him this way. They would humble him in comparison to themselves. They viewed themselves as important officialdom, but John is viewed as just a lowly and presumptuous citizen who is to be subject to them.

Second, the question “Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias [Elijah], neither that prophet?” said they wanted to know where John got the authority to baptize. Asking him why he baptized was not to discover the meaning of the baptism—they knew that all too well. Rather, they wanted to know where he got the authority to go around the land administering a religious rite. To the Sanhedrin, that was very important, for they felt they were *the* religious authority in the land. They did not recognize the fact that God would call anyone to service without going through them. John had not gone to their schools or been licensed to preach by their tribunal. Who does he think he is anyway to go out administrating a religious rite without first seeking on bended knee the permission of the Sanhedrin? They would intimidate, insult, and scorn John in comparison to their position.

God’s true servants are ever being attacked by some element in society which tries to bring them down to a low level in rank and hence in esteem in society. The world loves to picture and represent the minister as some sort of an eccentric who is a casper-milky-toast, effeminate type person who really has little worth or wisdom. Denominational officials get very upset when some preacher goes out on his own and does a work for God without denominational sponsorship or approval. Carnal church members likewise disesteem the

pastor. They are the first to question the pastor's authority to do this or that. In fact, in some churches these members are unwilling to give the pastor authority in even the least of matters. They feel they possess that authority, and the pastor better clear everything with them. This attitude of insolence towards the pastor is very troublesome to the church, and church members need to be cognizant of the fact that those who are the quickest to challenge the pastor's authority to make decisions in the church are those who have serious spiritual problems in their own lives and who will do the church no good at all but only create trouble.

The intentions of the questions. What was the purpose of this interrogation? Was it for the Sanhedrin to gain information they did not have? No, they were not all that interested in learning truth, as we noted above. John gave some good answers but gaining good answers was not their primary objective in questioning John. The main intent of this questioning of John was to do what they could to suppress the ministry of John the Baptist. "In their heart they derided him, and desired to do with him 'whatsoever they listed.' His preaching of repentance, and his unmeasured denunciation of themselves . . . were not to be borne. But they forbore to meet him in the open field, and resolved to send a deputation, which might extract some admission from his lips that would furnish them with ground for subsequent actions" (F. B. Meyer).

If one is asking questions without a genuine interest in gaining information, they obviously have ulterior motives in asking the questions. Generally the inquisition is to embarrass, to trap, and to incriminate the one questioned. So it was here, and so it was in the ministry of Jesus Christ; for these belligerents asked questions of Christ, too, hoping to catch him in his words (Mark 12:13ff). They did not really want information; the questions were only used to try and trick Him into condemning statements. The character of these belligerents was to oppose the spreading of Divine truth, and the questions evidenced it.

Organized religion has a bad record in regards to attacking the truth of God. They are used as much if not more by the devil than any other group. As an example, those who fought the great radio Gospel broadcasts the most were the leaders of the old Federal Council of Churches—now the National Council of Churches. The devil delights to use counterfeit religion to fight true religion. And in our Bible-believing churches, he often uses counterfeit Christians to be the biggest headache for the work of the church.

2. The Answers

Every word John the Baptist spoke in answer to the questions asked by this sordid delegation of spiritual malcontents came forth from a heart that was right with God—something no heart in that delegation could claim. John answered this fivefold inquiry with excellence. When asked if he was the Christ, he was emphatic in his answer: "He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ" (v. 20). John wanted no confusion on that issue, for he wanted Christ to have all the honor. When asked if he was Elijah, he

answered plainly and pointedly, “I am not” (v. 21). When asked if he was “that prophet,” John answered with a brief, dogmatic “No” (v. 21). When he was asked what he had to say about himself, he answered, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet, Esaias [Isaiah]” (v. 23). And when asked why he baptized if he was not Christ or Elijah or “that prophet,” John answered, “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” (vv. 26,27).

From these answers we will look at the boldness, the Scripturalness, the humbleness, and the witness of John.

The boldness in the answers. It took courage to answer these question without being evasive and without compromising on the truth. John’s first answer gives us a sample of his boldness. “He confessed, and denied not” (v. 20). It takes courage to confess the truth and not deny the truth. Under the duress of pressing circumstances, men often water down their confession of the truth and deny what they have said or where they have stood. As an example, Peter denied the Lord during those awful hours on the night before the crucifixion when he was in some rather pressing situations.

John’s courage not only was shown in his “confessed, and denied not” statement, but it also was shown in what he said regarding the interrogators ignorance of Christ: “There standeth one among you, whom ye know not” (v. 26). This group was not a group that liked being told about their ignorance. They were the teachers. That others should teach them was unthinkable. An example of this attitude is seen when representatives of the same group accosted the man who was healed of his blindness when he told them a few simple facts. They responded indignantly, “Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us?” (John 9:34). So this group was not teachable, for they thought they knew it all. But John the Baptist did not hesitate to tell them that right in their midst was Jesus Christ, and they did not even know it.

It always takes holy boldness for a minister to stand faithfully for truth and righteousness and to point out people’s spiritual needs. To preach against the sins of the people, as John did, and to expose their evil deeds for what they really are, and to point out Christ to those who have no interest but only animosity towards Him is not a work for weak-kneed, faint-hearted men. Those who lack courage to stand for truth and righteousness will not be faithful servants of Jesus Christ. They will be prone to compromise whenever their situation becomes a bit precarious.

The boldness of John was a prominent characteristic of him. He had to be spiritually courageous or he would have never fulfilled his ministry. We noted in previous studies his boldness to denounce this religious group as hypocrites and to call them a “generation of vipers.” We will see this boldness again in later studies in his standing up to Herod about his unholy marriage. Great men of God are bold in standing for truth and righteousness. Today when we talk about courage and boldness, we think of driving a race car at breakneck speed

around some oval or of some stunt man performing a daring act. But boldness of that sort is not true courage. It is stupidity. Real courage is when folk stand up consistently for truth and righteousness during times when it is very unpopular and perilous to do so.

The Scripturalness of his answers. The Scripturalness of his answers was especially emphasized when he answered the final query regarding his identity (“Who art thou . . . What sayest thou of thyself?”). In his answer to these questions, he quoted a well-known Old Testament text to tell them exactly who he was. He said, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness . . .” ([v. 23](#)). He quoted here from the [Isaiah 40](#) passage which spoke many centuries before of John’s ministry as the forerunner of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel. In answering from the Scripture as he did about himself, John showed these reprobate interrogators that his calling had the authority of the Word of God behind it; and that he was not a self-appointed minister bent on gaining personal glory. His ministry was validated by the Scripture, and there is no better validation.

When men question us concerning our faith and our service, we will give the best answers if we give Biblical answers. The Apostle Peter exhorts God’s people to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” ([1 Peter 3:15](#)), and the best way to be ready to give an answer for our faith is to know the Scripture and to give an answer that is fully supported by the Word of God. For the Word of God is the foundation upon which our hopes are built. If we cannot support our faith and calling by the Word of God, we need to examine them to see if they are really genuine.

The humbleness of his answers. John’s answers give us another look at his humility. Humility is such a prominent characteristic of John. We have seen it in his waiting for his call, in his response to Jesus requesting baptism, in his constant reiteration of the superiority of Christ over himself, and now here in his refusing to exalt himself. He would not take unto himself one iota of honor that did not belong to him. Plainly and emphatically he made sure they understood he was not Christ or Elijah or “that prophet.”

Especially is John’s humility seen in his response to the question, “What sayest thou of thyself?” That question begged for self-glorifying. Ask the average person that question today, and they will respond with a full length autobiography filled with vain and self-glorious chapters. In filling out job applications, such questions bring forth a flood of braggadocio that only remotely relates to the truth, if it relates at all. Many a preacher seems to view the pulpit as the place to talk continually about themselves in self-praising ways, to exalt themselves before the people, and to “humbly” (as they say) talk of their accomplishments. But Matthew Henry rightly said, “Those who speak best for Christ speak least of self” and “True servants are more on their guard against undo respect than unjust contempt.”

The witness of his answers. At the beginning of the interrogation narrative in the Gospel of John, we read, “This is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who art thou?”” ([v. 19](#)). To see the “witness” lesson in this text, we

need to understand that the word translated “record” is from the same word also translated “witness” in this first chapter of John. Four times the word is translated “witness,” and three times it is translated “record.” It would have helped much to show the instructive repetition of the word “witness” if the translators had consistently translated the word “witness” instead of interchanging it with the word “record.” This “witness” statement introducing the interrogation indicates that John gave a witness for Jesus Christ when questioned. Indeed he did, and it was a good witness. When the group questioned John, he made sure they got the message about Jesus Christ. With his answers, he led the interrogation to an emphasis on Christ and not on himself. He duly informed them Whom Christ was and Whom he was not, namely, John was not the Christ. He emphasized the superiority of Christ to himself by saying “He it is, who coming after me, is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose” (v. 27). We noted the ramifications of that answer in a previous study—it stated the Deity of Christ as well as His superiority to John the Baptist. Not many in any age are prone to witness of the Deity of Christ but rather attack it. And finally, John informed them that this Christ was even right now in public view where He could be seen and heard.

Yes, John gave an excellent witness for Jesus Christ in the arrogant interrogation of John by these belligerents. He gave these interrogators some very good information regarding the most important One of all. If they were going to be ignorant of Christ from now on, it would not be John’s fault; for he told them much about Christ. He made Christ known to these men in a very plain and powerful way—and that is the work of witnessing for Christ.

John’s turning of the interrogation into a witnessing experience is a real challenge to us to convert more of our circumstances into witnessing experiences. We often complain of little opportunity to witness. But if we were as diligent as John the Baptist in trying to turn every circumstance into a witnessing experience, we would be surprised at how much opportunity we have for witnessing about Jesus Christ. Witnessing opportunity is not limited to the church’s visitation program or some other special program. Witnessing can be and should be an everyday experience.

C. THE INDECISION IN THE BELLIGERENTS

Some time after John had been beheaded by Herod, these belligerents arrogantly questioned Jesus Christ about His authority as they had confronted John the Baptist about his authority. They asked Christ “by what authority doest thou these things?” ([Luke 20:2](#)). Christ’s teaching and cleaning out of the Temple had upset these religious leaders, and so they endeavored to attack and discredit the ministry of Christ through questioning Him about His authority. This questioning, as in the case with John, was not intended to gain needed information. The questioners only hoped to ensnare Christ by His answers.

The interrogation quickly became centered on John the Baptist, for Christ refused to answer their question until they answered a question of His about John the Baptist. Christ said, “I will also ask you one thing; and answer me: The baptism of John, was it from

heaven, or of men?” ([Luke 20:3,4](#)). Christ’s question trapped the interrogators in a no-win situation. They who tried to trap Christ were trapped themselves, for they could not answer that question in either way without undesirable consequences. If they answered that John’s baptism was of heaven, then they would be condemned for not believing him ([Luke 20:5](#)). If they answered that it was of men, they risked getting stoned by the people ([Luke 20:6](#)). So they said they “could not tell whence it was” ([Luke 20:7](#)). They would not make a decision. They tried to straddle the fence on the issue. But their indecision regarding John’s baptism really exposed and shamed them. It revealed three very condemning things about them: their unbelief, their cowardliness, and their incompetency.

1. The Unbelief in Their Indecision

The first thing exposed about these belligerents in their indecision about John’s ministry was their unbelief in John the Baptist. “They reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he [Christ] will say, Why then believed ye him not?” ([Luke 20:5](#)).

These men, who comprised the religious leadership of the land, were unbelievers. They would not accept John’s exhortation to repent of their sins, and they paid no attention to what John had to say about Jesus Christ being on the scene and what His work would be. They were not interested in having a pure heart. They only thought of satisfying their own passions for power, prestige, and pleasure. They, of course, tried to disguise their unbelief in John by questioning John as though he had not proven himself yet and, therefore, was not worthy of believing. But the problem was not in John; it was in their own wicked unbelieving hearts.

Since they did not believe in John, they would logically not believe in Jesus Christ either; for the two ministries were inseparable. If you will not believe one, you will not believe the other. If you will not believe what John said about Christ, then, of course, you will not believe Christ. If you do not believe Christ, you will not believe John; for John’s whole ministry was that of being Christ’s forerunner, and Christ was exactly what John said He was. So they attacked Christ just as they attacked John. Servants of Jesus Christ should not be surprised if when their message about Christ is rejected that they too will be rejected and despised by unbelievers.

The lack of faith among these religious leaders reminds us that you can be very religious, hold high position in religion but still be an unbeliever. Every generation has an abundance of famous religious leaders who are notorious for their denial of the great truths of the Word of God. And Satan works very effectively through this religious unbelief. When a religious leader denies great truths of the faith, it carries a lot more weight than a denial coming from some non-religious person. But, unfortunately, the people of today are not as willing to vehemently reject (“stone” [Luke 20:6](#)) those religious leaders who deny the faith. Rather, they seem much more inclined to accept and revere the apostate leaders than the people of Christ’s day did those who rejected John the Baptist.

2. The Cowardliness in Their Indecision

Faith, not unbelief, produces courage. Unbelief makes cowards. The belligerents demonstrated this fact. They were afraid to express their feelings about John the Baptist lest the people attack them. “If we say, Of men; all the people will stone us; for they are persuaded that John was a prophet” ([Luke 20:6](#)).

These men were not going to be martyrs. They would speak up only if it would not jeopardize their lives. They would talk out of both sides of their mouth if they had to in order to save their hides. Such folk cannot be counted on to speak the truth at all times, for a person will not be impartial if he is not willing to take a position regardless of the consequences. Martyrs come from those of strong faith—never from those who were more interested in their self-preservation than in standing for the truth. But self was the main interest of this spiritually degenerated bunch. They were not interested in the promotion of truth and righteousness; they were only interested in the promotion of themselves.

This kind still abounds today. In the secular world we see it often in the conduct of politicians. Many politicians have no courage to stand strong and true for that which is right. It is obvious that most of them only want to be elected and will say whatever is necessary to get elected. This kind is often seen in the ministry, too. Ministers who are more interested in getting a job than doing a job will say whatever is necessary in order to convince a pulpit committee that they are the right man for the church. When morals and doctrinal issues come on the scene, they put their finger in the air to see which direction the wind is blowing in their church, and then they take the prevailing position so they can keep their coveted pastorate. They have no courage to stand faithfully for truth and righteousness. Such men are a curse to the church; but in spite of that, they are often found in high denominational posts, just as the religious leaders were in the days of John the Baptist.

3. The Incompetency in Their Indecision

When they said to Christ “that they could not tell from whence it was” ([Luke 20:7](#)), they unwittingly declared their great incompetency to be in the position of authority they claimed to be. These were the boasted religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, which claimed to be the final word on all religious matters. They posed as the great experts who would declare whether a man or movement was of God or not. Yet, by their indecision regarding the source of John’s ministry, they professed to not be able to tell whether the ministry of John the Baptist was good or bad. What incompetency! If they cannot pass judgment on such an important and public ministry as John the Baptist, which was right before their eyes, they are totally incompetent to be in any place of leadership in religion. If they cannot discern the most important events of the day in religion, they are worthless as leaders. These men felt they were the source of wisdom in the knowledge of religion, but their indecision about John’s ministry negated their claims. Their indecision simply said they could not tell true from false teaching or real from sham religion. Therefore, they had no business acting so authoritarian in questioning Jesus Christ (or John the Baptist earlier) about His authority.

It certainly could be said of Christ in His questioning of these religious leaders about John the Baptist, He “taketh the wise in their own craftiness” ([1 Corinthians 3:19](#)). He forced these belligerents to make fools of themselves, to confess their great incompetency—an incompetency which was rooted and grounded in a character deficiency, not in an information deficiency. Their scheme for ensnaring and shaming Christ backfired, for no one will ever take on God in a crafty way and come out anything but a fool.

This is a picture of what will eventually happen to all unbelievers. The unbeliever may have clever and applauded arguments here on earth, he may deceive and impress many with his rejection of Divine truth, but he will eventually experience great shame in eternity because of his willful, arrogant, and belligerent unbelief. His ways will be shown to be great folly. Shame will be his lot forever.

IX. BOUND

[LUKE 3:19,20](#); [MATTHEW 11:2-6](#)

THE PUBLIC MINISTRY of John the Baptist ended abruptly with his arrest and imprisonment by Herod Antipas, the notorious grandson of Herod the Great. It was an outrageous injustice to imprison John. But evil men, such as Herod-Antipas, cannot be expected to conduct themselves or govern their country in accordance with justice. Being wicked to the core, they will rule in a very wicked manner.

Though John was bound ([Matthew 14:3](#)), yet, as it was with the Apostle Paul when he was imprisoned, “the word of God is not bound” ([2 Timothy 2:9](#)). The devil may imprison God’s messengers, but he can never imprison God’s message. John was taken out of man’s sight, but he was not out of God’s sight; and today his prison experience still teaches us.

We will study John’s imprisonment under two main headings: the detaining of John and the doubting by John. The detaining of John was that which led to the momentary doubting by John.

A. THE DETAINING OF JOHN

It was a dark day when the soldiers of Herod came and arrested John and hauled him off to the dungeon at Machaerus. Scripture is silent as to the actual details of John’s arrest, but it is not silent as to other significant factors regarding the imprisonment of John. We will note the prompting of the imprisonment, the place of the imprisonment, the perspective of the imprisonment, and the penalty for the imprisonment.

1. The Prompting of the Imprisonment

“But Herod the tetrarch, being reproved by him for Herodias his brother Philip’s wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, Added yet this above all, that he shut up John in prison” ([Luke 3:19,20](#)). The one thing we know very well about John’s imprisonment is why it occurred. Scripture spells that out very plainly. John was imprisoned because he spoke out against Herod’s sins. There were times when Herod “heard him gladly” ([Mark 6:20](#)), for the spiritually empowered preaching attracted Herod. But when John spoke of Herod’s sins, then Herod got upset. He was like a good many people in our churches. They enjoy good, earnest preaching that opens up the Word and makes it live—it sure beats the dull, lifeless preaching that too often fills our pulpits—but when such preaching begins to indict their own sins and step on their toes; then they get angry and will attack the preacher.

John spoke out against many of Herod’s sins, but the one sin which was chief in prompting the arrest was Herod’s immoral marriage. This is emphasized clearly in other Synoptic references to the arrest: “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” ([Mark 6:17,18](#), cp. [Matthew 14:3,4](#)). Not only did the denouncing of this sin put John in prison, but it also eventually caused the severing of John’s head from his body. In our next chapter, when we deal with John’s beheading, we will look more at this divorce and remarriage sin and the character of those who commit it. Suffice it here to note that John’s arrest was a result of preaching against Herod’s sins—particularly Herod’s forbidden marriage.

John’s arrest for speaking out against Herod’s sins tells us two things: it tells us about the hostility to this preaching and about the honesty in this preaching.

The hostility to this preaching. John the Baptist learned quickly how hostile the world is to one who dares denounce its evils. It is always precarious to take a stand against evil in this world. As an example, the one who blows the whistle at work on some wrong doing is likely to get fired—the wrong doer seldom does. Preaching against sin is especially precarious to do. Any preacher who dares to denounce the sins of the day is exposing himself to the wrath of wicked men. They will attack him with a critical tongue and with cruel deeds.

With the *critical tongue* they will accuse those who preach against sin of lacking love (their favorite accusation), respect, good sense, and other noble character traits. But all of those accusations are merely a smoke screen to distract from the message and to discredit the minister. When the message itself cannot be easily discredited because it is true, folk often turn to slandering the messenger to discredit him in the eyes of his listeners. In this way the message will then not be given much validity; for after all, if the man is no good, one certainly is not inclined to believe his message.

With *cruel deeds* they will endeavor to stop the ministry of the one indicting sin. The powers that be will make unjust laws against such preaching, throw these preachers in jail, lynch them, and burn them at the stake as history testifies again and again. Sometimes even churches get involved in acts of cruelty to their ministers who dare to preach against the

sins of the congregation. They do this by giving their pastor a mean and unjust dismissal. And this happens frequently. In fact, if the truth were known, it is the indicting of sins that causes the most dismissals of pastors from their churches. Wicked people masquerading as respectable church members cannot stand the heat and light of holiness upon their pet sins, and their reaction is often to attack the pastor and see to it that he is ousted from his job. Of course, the reason he is ousted from his pastorate is seldom common knowledge, for these wicked church members manage to spread around enough slander (which depicts the pastor as an incompetent and unloving man lacking in pastoral skills and character) to keep most folk from knowing the real truth.

The honesty in this preaching. John's indicting of Herod for his sins tells us John was no respecter of persons. He was an honest preacher. He was not two-faced. He did not go hard on the common folk but easy on the high class. He did not thunder forth God's holiness upon those who could not attack him then put velvet on his tongue when he spoke to men of power. No, John was a faithful man of God. He proclaimed God's message faithfully regardless of who was in his audience.

Unfortunately, this is a rare trait in ministers. Too many ministers succumb to the temptation to go soft on the sins of high officials and influential people when they are in the congregation. It is not necessarily what these preachers say that is so bad, but it is what they do not say that indicts them and shows their dishonesty in preaching. These preachers are quite popular, and most folks think they are very successful ministers. But the day will come when their ministry will be shown to be a dishonest one filled with wholesale compromising in order to save their face and their job. Often when we see a large church, we wonder what sort of compromising is necessary to hold a pastorate in that place. With the constituency of these large churches, one knows that the pastor cannot have the integrity of John the Baptist in his preaching and convictions; or he would never last long as the pastor.

2. The Place of the Imprisonment

The prison in which John was incarcerated was part of the Machaerus palace complex Herod the Great had built for himself. When Herod the Great died, the rule of Palestine was divided up among his sons. Herod Antipas, the Herod of John's arrest, was given a fourth part of the kingdom ("tetrarch" [[Luke 3:19](#)] means one-fourth) which included the provinces of Galilee and Perea. Perea was a narrow strip of land approximately 15 miles wide by 65 miles long located on the east of the Jordan river. Its southern boundary was about halfway down the coast of the Dead Sea. Machaerus, where the palace was located, was near the end of the southern border of Perea in the rough mountainous area. Vincent describes the palace complex as follows: "Perched on an isolated cliff at the end of a narrow ridge, encompassed with deep ravines, was the citadel. At the other end of this ridge Herod [the Great] built a great wall, with towers two hundred feet high at the corners; and within this enclosure, a magnificent palace, with colonnades, baths, cisterns, arsenals—every provision,

in short, for luxury and for defense against siege. The windows commanded a wide and grand prospect, including the Dead Sea, the course of the Jordan, and Jerusalem. In the detached citadel, probably in one of the underground dungeons, remains of which may still be seen, was the prison of John.”

The confinement in a small, dank, dark dungeon would be a severe trial for anyone, but especially for a man like John the Baptist; for he was an outdoors person. John was used to much freedom of movement, the fresh air, the sun, and the enjoyment of the views of hills and valleys and sky. F. B. Meyer said, “They bound the child of the desert-wastes, with his love for dear liberty—sensitive to the touch of the sunshine and the breeze, to the beauty that lay over the hills, accustomed to go and come at his will . . . Ah, it is little short of a sin to engage a wild bird, beating its heart against the bars of its narrow cage, when the sun calls it to mount up with quivering ecstasy to the gates of day; but what a sin to bind the preacher of righteousness, and imprison him in sunless vaults—what an agony!”

Though isolated the prison was from society, yet John’s imprisonment did not exclude visitors. He was evidently permitted to see some of his loyal disciples at times. And loyal disciples they certainly were, for coming to visit John as his disciple was literally taking their lives in their hands. Unlike the fair weather Christians which populate our churches, these disciples were not ashamed of John and his message because of his imprisonment; and they did for John what some of Paul’s faithful followers did for him when he was in prison, they “oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain” ([2 Timothy 1:16](#)). God will have choice rewards for those saints who ministered to God’s faithful servants when they were in distressing circumstances. And that goes for the people who have stood by a maligned pastor, too.

3. The Perspective of the Imprisonment

It is a real test of our faith to see a John the Baptist put in prison and then eventually beheaded. Why can a wicked, no good, immoral man and woman cause a great man of God to have his ministry cut off and to be put out of society? To put it in another and more up-to-date way, why can a few rebellious, outspoken, out-of-place men and women in a church cause a godly pastor (and his family) to be pushed out of the church and parsonage into unemployment and given a black mark on his ministerial record? It does not seem right. Where is God?

Yes, the incongruity of the situation immediately impresses the mind of the godly. Here is wicked Herod and Herodias sitting in luxury in the palace while godly John the Baptist is detained in an awful, dark, dank, depressive dungeon. It is the incongruity that the Psalmist sees in [Psalm 73](#) and that Habakkuk reports in [Habakkuk 1](#). Why do the wicked prosper and tread on the godly; and, to make matters worse, why is this incongruity such a common thing in this world? It occurs all the time all over the world. Truth and righteousness are forever being thrown in the dungeons while unholy living is accorded all the finery of life. Joseph in prison in Egypt, Jeremiah in the miry pit, Daniel in the den of lions, Christ on the

cross, the apostles in jail after jail, countless Christians in prison cells of cruelty heading for martyrdom, and saints suffering in the strongholds of Siberia is the history of the world.

Two conclusions often surface when these situations develop. We often conclude that either God has failed or that John the Baptist has failed. But neither of these conclusions is valid. God has not failed, and John the Baptist has not failed.

God has not failed. Generally the first thing we conclude when injustice occurs is that God has lost control, has forgotten us, or no longer cares for us. We reason that if God was powerful, had His mind upon us, and really loved and cared for us He would never allow these things to happen. But the Scriptures will not encourage us to think this way, for many are the trials of God's people which have resulted in increased blessing and enlarged ministries. Joseph went through terrible times, but it all worked out wonderfully for his ministry. Daniel's imprisonment resulted in bringing more honor to God. Christ's crucifixion—the greatest of all lessons here—made it possible for sinners to be saved. There are many blessings and lessons we cannot learn except through troubles and trials. So when these troubles and trials come, we must never conclude God has lost control, has forgotten, or does not care. Time will show us just the opposite. It will take faith during the trial to see this, of course. But we have much precedent in Scripture to encourage our faith. God had some very noble reasons for John's imprisonment—many of those reasons we do not know yet but will in eternity. However, some reasons we do know—as an example, this imprisonment enlarged John's ministry, for by it we are taught some very valuable lessons concerning doubts and how to react to them (lessons we will see a bit later in this chapter).

John the Baptist has not failed. Scripture will not allow us to criticize John the Baptist's ministry, yet he was rejected. No way, therefore, can we attribute this rejection to failure on the part of John. But to hear the "success" boys preaching in our churches today, you would have to conclude that John failed. They seem to have little room in their preaching for an experience like John's. They tell us that all we have to do is "just win souls" and our church will grow and we will be a successful preacher. We never hear from them that if you are faithful to truth and righteousness you may lose your crowd and end up as a cast-out of society—including the ministerial society. Their success formulas do not seem to include a Noah getting only eight on the ark, or the stoning of godly Naboth, or the imprisonment on bread and water of faithful Micaiah, or the habitual rejection of the Old Testament prophets, or the martyrdom of countless saints in the church age. Their thinking is that if a preacher is in some place of rejection, he must be a failure; he must not have gone door-to-door as he should have and was not zealous enough for souls; or he would have had a big church and have been well received. But such a perspective is not Scriptural nor is it helpful to the saint today. Rejection is often the consequence of noble Christian living. In fact, popular reception in the ministry today may be more indicative of failure than rejection is.

4. The Penalty for the Imprisonment

Matthew reminds us that an attack upon God's faithful servants has a price to it that society can ill afford to pay. "Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee" ([Matthew 4:12](#)). The word translated "departed" is a "favorite word of St. Matthew's [he uses it ten times while Mark and John use it but once each and Acts uses it only twice] . . . It always implies some motive for the change of place, and is frequently used of departure directly consequent upon knowledge acquired. Hence it often implies a feeling of danger" (A. Lukyn Williams). Since the arrest of John took place in the area of Jerusalem and Judea, Christ, Who was in the area, moved elsewhere as a precautionary measure. Of course, Herod could not touch Christ if Christ would not allow it. But Christ's habit was to use human means whenever practical to protect His ministry from being endangered. He did not use the miraculous powers He possessed to protect Himself in precarious places if human means would do the job. Going to Galilee was going where Herod still ruled, but it was out of the area where Herod was most active at the time and, therefore, a safer area.

Though the move was precautionary, the effect was to penalize the Jerusalem and Judea area by taking from them the blessing of Christ's presence. When man's conduct forces God to take cover, so to speak, man will be penalized greatly. He will suffer great loss. When God's servants are not protected and revered, the blessing of Christ will not abide. He will be forced to leave one way or another. He will not abide where He is not honored and His work is not respected.

Churches often experience this judgment. The mistreatment of God's servants, the pastors, has sealed many churches doom of unproductiveness. The carnal church member forever thinks that if they can just get rid of the current pastor then they will get their church moving. Ah, but it will never move for God! If folk would remember this truth about the peril of mistreating God's servants, they would not be puzzled as to why a number of churches are so sick and seem to only go through the motions. Church growth experts prescribe new programs with more entertainment, promotions, and other goings-on to stir up the people; but that is not a spiritual rejuvenation. That is only a rattling of the bones of a dead man. Arrest John the Baptist and Christ will go elsewhere.

B. THE DOUBTING BY JOHN

One of the evidences of the veracity of the Bible is that it faithfully reports the failures as well as the successes of some of its greatest characters. The lies of Abraham and Isaac, the loss of temper by Moses which cost him the privilege of entering the promise land, the adultery and murder by David, the juniper tree experience of Elijah, the pride of Hezekiah, and the denials by Peter are all reported in the Holy Writ. As much as we may wish that our Bible heroes did not have these black marks on their accounts, we can be thankful, however, that these records are in the Scriptures. As F. B. Meyer said about the Scripture reporting the failures of its greatest saints, "In this the Spirit of God has rendered us untold

service, because we learn that the material out of which He made the greatest saints was flesh and blood like ourselves . . . If only the ladder rests on the low earth, where we live and move and have our being, there is some hope of our climbing to stand with others who have ascended its successive rungs and reached the starry heights.”

These observations introduce us to the failure of John the Baptist’s faith. As great a man as he was, yet Scripture reports an occasion when he had his doubts about Jesus Christ. “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?” ([Matthew 11:2,3](#)). When we read those verses, we can hardly believe our eyes. We wonder if they can really be true, for what they say seems so incongruent with what we have been learning about John the Baptist. Is this the great John the Baptist who stood so courageously and gallantly against sin, and who so earnestly and faithfully pointed men to Jesus Christ? Yes, it is the same man; for there was indeed a time when John went through a period of doubt about Jesus Christ. And the Bible faithfully records the experience for our learning.

Sometimes we think that doubt is above great men. We can understand when we doubt, but we put great men above that attitude. However, life will not encourage the exempting of great men from times of doubt. Some of the greatest saints in the church have had dark seasons of doubt. Martin Luther, as an example, had many dark days. He once wrote, “Having all but lost my Christ, I was beaten by the waves and tempests of despair.” John Bunyan, the author of the classic book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, who went to jail rather than compromise his faith, said, “Though God has visited my soul with never so blessed a discovery of Himself, yet afterwards I have been in my spirit so filled with darkness, that I could not so much as once conceive what that God and that comfort were with which I had been refreshed.” Even in the secular world we find some great achievers who demonstrated surprising doubt at times. It is said that Shakespeare in some times of despondency thought himself no poet, and Raphael at times doubted that he should be called a painter. So great men are not exempt from seasons of doubt. It is hard to find a greater man than John the Baptist, but he still had the blues; he still had a time when doubt clouded out certainties.

Since doubt is not only common to the ordinary person but is also a frequent visitor of great men, the doubting experience of John recorded in Scripture will be especially helpful to all who ponder and study it. In our examination of the doubting experience of John, we will note the reasons, the remedy, and the remonstrance for the doubting.

1. The Reasons for the Doubting

When we read about John doubting concerning the identity of Christ, our first reaction is to ask why. How could a man like that doubt? Here was a man of God who really knew Jesus Christ. How could he doubt Him? The answer to that question is not all that difficult to discover. When you consider his circumstances and his concepts, it is not hard to understand why he had his time of despair. These are chronic producers of doubt in people from all walks of life.

His circumstances. Three things can be said about John's circumstances as they are reported in the Scripture. They were depressing, disappointing, and divulging.

First, the circumstances were *depressing*. It is extremely difficult to keep a consistent positive attitude in oppressing circumstances, and John the Baptist was certainly in oppressive circumstances at the time of his doubting experience. He was in bonds in a cruel prison, the victim of gross injustice. To be cooped up in a dingy, dirty, dark, smelly hole is going to affect the thinking of any man sooner or later even if injustice is not involved and even if he was not a man of the open fields as John the Baptist was.

Second, the circumstances were *disappointing*. They were disappointing in that there was a lack of alleviation of his circumstances by Christ. This always causes problems with our faith. As Matthew Henry said, "He might be tempted to think, if Jesus be indeed the Messiah, whence is it that I, his friend and forerunner, am brought into this trouble, and am left to be so long in it, and he never looks after me, never visits me, nor sends to me, enquires not after me, does nothing either to sweeten my imprisonment or hasten my enlargement." It was reported to him that Christ was doing many works, but none of them were done to set John free. Our Lord, as He always does, had good reasons for not releasing John from prison (or us from some of our trying circumstances); but when all you can see is the ugly walls of a dungeon, it is very hard to have a positive perspective on the situation.

Third, they were *divulging*. Our bad circumstances reveal what our faith is built upon. They reveal the fact that the vibrancy of our faith depends a lot more on good circumstances than most of us want to admit. Folk often think their faith is based solely on the Word of God, and that come what may they will not be shaken. But all it takes for most of us is simply to have a bad day (not be put in prison as John was, but just have a bad day), and we act like the Lord has forsaken us and that the Bible is not working for us at all. The way many Christians talk about their problems, one wonders if they have any faith at all. How often God's people can be observed talking and singing enthusiastically about their faith on Sunday but then rushing off to some psychiatrist or other worldly advisors on Monday to deal with their problems—which on Sunday they indicated God and His Word could solve. Yes, frequently our faith is based on good circumstances, not on the Word of God. We may argue that fact—but when we face a crisis, we will discover to our great shame that our faith is not nearly as strong as we thought. So when we observe John's failures, it is a humbling reminder of our greater failures in the area of doubt and of our great need to more earnestly endeavor to build our faith on God's Word rather than on good circumstances.

His concepts. The ministry of Jesus Christ in His first coming was very difficult for the average Jew to accept. They knew of the promises of humiliation for the Messiah which were in the Old Testament, but there were also many promises of His glory and power. The latter were the ones they understood and liked the best, and so they simply ignored the former. Their concept, therefore, of the Messiah was One Who would come to earth and destroy the hated enemies of the Jews and set up a kingdom that would overpower all the kingdoms

of the world. They had little thought that He would first purge out the heart of the people before He would purge out the enemies of the people.

John the Baptist was not altogether separated from this sort of thinking. He “was not wholly emancipated from the Jewish tendency to regard the external results of the kingdom” (A. Lukyn Williams). While John was not as materialistic in his thinking of the kingdom as the average Israelite, and while he saw Christ as the Lamb of God, yet John’s view of Christ’s ministry could understandably reflect more judgment action than what Christ was doing. John’s message had emphasized the “axe is laid unto the root of the trees” ([Matthew 3:10](#)) and His “fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor . . . will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” ([Matthew 3:12](#)). But Christ had done none of that so far as John could perceive. In fact, he seemed to be dilatory in this judgment work. Where was Christ’s judgment upon wicked Herod who had so terribly mistreated the forerunner? Where was Christ’s judgment upon the wicked religious leaders? Why did not Christ do something about the oppressing rule of the Roman government? “John had partial views of the Christ—he thought of Him only as the Avenger of sin . . . the dread Judge of all. There was apparently no room in his conception for the gentler, sweeter, tenderer aspects of his Master’s nature” (F. B. Meyer).

Coupling these concepts of Christ’s ministry with very depressing circumstances, one can readily see why John could ask, “Art thou he that should come or look we for another?” Many in the world with less distressing circumstances, but with poor Biblical understanding of the work of Christ and God, often ask similar questions of criticism of Divine behavior. Men are ever asking why God allows war, why He allows the innocent to suffer and the wicked to prosper, why He allows false religion to deceive so many and to blaspheme God without seemingly experiencing any punishment for their wicked creeds, and why He allows disease to ravage mankind. Some have a concept of Divine love that is totally unbiblical which complains that if God is a God of love why does He send people to hell. When troubles oppress, these false concepts only work overtime in our thinking; and we are quick to accuse God of failure. How important it is then that we diligently study the Word of God and be accurate in our knowledge of God and His ways so that when seemingly unjust and intolerable situations develop, we will not be critical and distrusting of God in His actions.

2. The Remedy for the Doubting

What we should do when we are hit with an attack of doubt will be seen from this experience of John the Baptist. It is so important that we do the right thing when doubts come. How we react to our doubts will determine what our doubts will do to us—whether they will overcome us or whether they will be overcome by us. We have a threefold instruction here on what to do in times of doubt: the position to take, the person to see, and the proofs to review.

The position to take. John, unlike many today, was not content to stay in the state of doubt. He addressed his doubts and took action to deal with them. That is the only right position to take regarding our doubts. John wanted certainty—and in spiritual matters we all need to be that way. If ever we need certainty in anything, we need it in spiritual matters. That which affects us eternally is not something we can afford to be uncertain about.

Of course, the world would tell us we cannot know for certain in spiritual matters, for the devil does not want us to do anything about our doubts but wants us to keep them—and a good many do just that. In fact, some boast of their doubts, write them up in a book, preach them, and extol them. Many apostate ministers do that. They seem to think it is a mark of intelligence to doubt every Bible truth they can. But instead of being a mark of intelligence, it is a mark of spiritual imbecility.

It is not a wise man who honors his doubts—he who does that does not help anyone. If you have nothing to speak about regarding your spiritual faith but doubts, then sit down. Let someone talk who knows what is certain. They can be a help to the soul, but you with your doubts cannot.

The person to see. John the Baptist knew the right place to go to get help in dealing with his doubts. He took his doubts to the Lord. He did not go to some unbeliever or some enemy of the Lord. The best place to learn about Christ is to go to Christ. When we have doubts about our faith, we need to go to the Lord. Go to Him in prayer and especially go to Him in His Word. Scripture was given to help us believe, not doubt. “These things have I written unto you . . . that ye may know . . . and that ye may believe” ([1 John 5:13](#)). Going to the world, going to the skeptics will only make matters worse. When you are sick go where you can get well, not where you will get sicker. As another said, “Instead of conversing with Voltaire . . . let them converse with Jesus” (J. A. MacDonald).

The proofs to review. When the two disciples of John came to Christ to ask if He were the Expected One, Christ gave a simple but very sound answer. He said, “Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see” ([Matthew 11:4](#)). Those were the basic orders. Then Christ elaborated on what “those things” were: “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” ([Matthew 11:5](#)).

John was simply told to review what proofs he already had. He was to review the things he already knew about Christ. Christ was indeed fulfilling the predictions of the prophets (cp. [Isaiah 35:5](#), [61:1](#)). Of course not every prediction was being fulfilled as yet, such as, “proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” ([Isaiah 61:1](#)). These promises would be especially applicable and of interest to John. But John was not to ponder the promises yet unfulfilled. He was to be reminded again of those that had come to pass.

In this review, John could look at plenty that supported the claims of Christ as the

Messiah. As an example, the miracles said plenty. Nothing like that had ever occurred before. Only the true Messiah could be doing those things. Interestingly, Christ seemed to want to provide even more miracle evidence for John, for Luke tells us that “In that same hour [when the two disciples came to express John’s doubt] he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight” ([Luke 7:21](#)). John’s two disciples witnessed an abundance of miracles which would only be more facts for John to review. Another proof John could consider was the fact that the Gospel was preached to the poor was very weighty evidence of Christ being the Messiah. For that was one of the promises in the prophets ([Isaiah 61:1](#)) concerning the Messiah, and it was a significant promise; for “The philosophers of old addressed themselves only to the great and learned, whilst they wholly overlooked the lower classes of society . . . [therefore] This [the fact that the Gospel was being preached to the poor by Christ] of itself was a strong presumptive proof that he was the Messiah, because an impostor would rather have sought to gain over to his interests the great and powerful” (Charles Simeon). One more proof John could remind himself of was a proof that Christ did not even mention, namely, the Spirit of God descending on Christ at His baptism. John saw that, and God had informed him it was the great proof that Christ was the Messiah ([John 1:32,33](#)).

If John was like us, however, he would only look at the promises not yet received rather than at those already received. He would ignore the things Christ had said and instead ponder the prophecies He had not yet fulfilled. He would focus on the negative and ignore the positive. It is a habit of the fallen nature; it is the habit of unbelief. Instead of rejoicing in what God has already done, we are lamenting what He has not yet done. Instead of concentrating on the evidences we do have, we concentrate on what we do not see. Instead of counting our blessings, we focus on our needs. We look on perplexities more than on what we do understand. Then we wonder why our doubts grow and our faith languishes.

The value of review is emphasized in this message to John. Notice the word “again.” The disciples were to “Go and show John again.” How this encourages us to read and study our Bible again and again and to be in church week after week to hear the Word of God preached and taught again and again. So often the flesh complains about the constant review—but unless we continue to review again and again the great truths of the Word of God, we will linger in our doubt and grow spiritually indifferent. The best facts, the greatest promises, and the strongest warnings will do us no good if we forget them. We must breathe again and again and eat again and again if we expect to sustain life in the physical area. Likewise we must get into the Word of God again and again if we are to stay strong in our faith and overcome our doubts.

3. The Remonstrations for the Doubting

The last thing which Jesus Christ told the two disciples of John was, “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me” ([Matthew 11:6](#)). It was a mild and instructive rebuke for the exhibition of doubt. It is a beatitude which we need to put right alongside the

beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 5:3–12](#)). It is a remonstrance we all need.

The message of this beatitude is for those whose faith stumbles over that which they cannot understand about the workings of God in life, and it is also for those who would complain of God's dealings with them. There are a number of things that can offend one about Christ if he views Christ only from the present circumstances and values of the day. Christ's humble situation in His first coming was hard on the flesh and offended many ([Mark 6:3](#)). Christ's doctrine is too hard for many; hence, many were offended over it and left following Christ ([John 6:60–66](#)). The self-denial required of His followers offends the materialistic. The fewness and lowliness of His followers often offends those who must have the praise and esteem of men. God's will for our lives is often offensive because it crosses our own stubborn will which we prefer. When criticism and persecution comes for one's faith, many are offended and quit serving because they think God has wronged them. All of these folk need the beatitude given John the Baptist.

The message of the beatitude says the way to be happy ("blessed" means happy) is to not recant our faith when persecuted, to not complain when we must suffer for doing right, to not be embarrassed to live as Christ would have us live, to praise the Lord just as well on cloudy days as on sunshiny days, to accept God's dealings with us in a sweet attitude and not in a sullen resignation, to accept God's dealings with us even though they seem a puzzle and unexplainable to human minds—trusting that His wisdom is far greater than our finite minds can comprehend and that He knows best, and to remember that God often does not deliver us from our circumstances but rather gives us grace to live victoriously in our circumstances in order to show His power through us.

To be unoffended in Christ means we have to have a perspective of life that takes in more than our present situation. We must look beyond today's problems to eternity's plan. If today's situation was the final conclusion of life, it would be filled with a host of inequities. Indeed, God would be unjust. But today is not the end of the show. John the Baptist was in prison in as unjust a situation as one could imagine. Herod was in the palace above him indulging in a host of fleshly wants. What inequity. But that is not the end of the game. Much time has come and gone since those days—nearly 2,000 years. In that time, John has enjoyed the bliss of heaven while Herod has experienced the burning of hell. John has been praised by generation after generation for nearly two millenniums while Herod has been scorned. But that is not all either—there is still an eternity for both John and Herod to continue their experiences.

When we duly consider these truths, we will not be likely to be offended in Jesus Christ. It is the shortsighted view that has problems with being offended. That is the view which Satan emphasizes. He ever concentrates on our present lack and ignores our future provisions. Of course, such an emphasis will cause the flesh to complain about God's care which is exactly what Satan wants us to do—as is attested by his first attack upon man in the Garden of Eden. But blessed is he who does not have a shortsighted view of life and who,

therefore, is not offended in Jesus Christ. Blessed is he who waits patiently on the Lord to fulfill His whole program.

X. BEHEADED

[MATTHEW 14:3-12](#); [MARK 6:17-29](#)

THE GRUESOME BEHEADING of John the Baptist is not a story for weak stomachs or weak saints. It is an event that shows man at his very worst. It reminds us that the more one is favored of God, the more unkindly he is likely to be treated by the world; and the more holy a person is, the more hated he will be by the world.

The beheading of John the Baptist is such a significant event that in one of the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, it is the only major story that is not primarily about Christ. However, Mark (as well as Matthew) introduces the account of the beheading of John by a reference to the works of Christ. Mark tells us that when Herod heard of the great works of Christ, he thought it was John the Baptist risen from the grave. Then after giving that account of Herod's feelings, Mark gives a flashback to the event—reporting the details of John's death which we are going to study in this chapter.

In our study of this event, we will note the provoker of the beheading, the particulars of the beheading, and the postlude of the beheading.

A. THE PROVOKER OF THE BEHEADING

In our last chapter we noted that John's preaching against sin resulted in his being imprisoned by Herod. We stated that while John spoke against a number of Herod's sins, the one which rankled Herod (and Herodias) the most was John's speaking out against Herod's unlawful marriage to Herodias. It was the indictment of this particular sin which eventually led to the beheading of John. Therefore, in plain, simple, everyday terms, the reason John was beheaded was because he opposed divorce and the remarriage of divorced people.

Many are the sermons on John's beheading, but few of them spend much time on the provoker of the beheading—the divorce and remarriage issue. It takes some clever side-stepping to avoid that fact, of course; but many preachers are very gifted at doing so and for obvious reasons—their congregations are filled with divorced people, and they do not want to upset them. After all, look what happened to John the Baptist when he upset a divorced couple about their marriage. Times have not changed. Let any preacher dare to oppose divorce and remarriage strongly and forcefully as John the Baptist did, and heads will roll—his particularly. The indictment of the divorce-remarriage sin will bring more heated and hated reaction from the average church congregation than the indictment of just about any

other sin. In our day with churches full of divorce, it is obvious that precious few preachers stand with John the Baptist.

We want to look at the divorce issue, this provoker of John's beheading, and note four things from Herod and Herodias about the practice of divorce and remarriage. These four things are: the defilement of the practice, the destructiveness of the practice, the denouncing of the practice, and the defending of the practice.

1. The Defilement of the Practice

The story of how Herod ended up with Herodias as his wife should not be difficult for our generation to accept. It is the same kind of sordid story one can read everyday in the newspapers about many of our nation's famous people who are more filthy morally than they are famous. Of course, the practice is not limited to the famous; it is, unfortunately, a common practice of the ordinary person, too. The famous are just the ones who get their immoral episodes reported in the newspapers' headlines.

The beginning of Herod's adulterous marriage association with Herodias occurred when he took a trip to Rome and on the way stopped by to visit his brother Philip (Philip whose mother was Mariamne, not the Philip who was a tetrarch whose mother was Cleopatra). While visiting in Philip's home, he became infatuated with Philip's wife, Herodias, and she with him. The fact that both of them were already married (Herod had married the daughter of Aretas, the ruler of Nabatean Arabia whose capital was the famous city of Petra) did not interfere with their budding romance. It only necessitated divorcing their mates so they could be married.

For Herodias, this marriage greatly elevated her in the social world which had to please her greatly; for she was a very arrogant, headstrong, ambitious woman. Herod was the greatest prince of the Herodian family; and this meant she would move up in rank, wealth, magnificence, and fame. Her first husband, Philip, was a quiet man and apparently had little position in government. Changing partners would feed her ego and give her power. So she left Philip and took her daughter Salome with her and became Herod's wife.

But regardless of the advantages and pleasures this marriage provided Herodias and Herod, the whole affair reeked of unholy behavior. It was a lifestyle based on nothing but "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" ([1 John 2:16](#)). All it did was defile the participants. It had no regard for that which was clean, pure, and holy. But, of course, it was as legal as the law of the land could make it. And the law of the land made it very legal. Today our laws would not condemn the arrangement either, for there was nothing substantially different between this divorce and remarriage than what goes on all over our country day after day—even among our church members. But we need to remember that the laws of men do not nullify the laws of God. And God's Word says, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery" ([Mark 10:11,12](#)). The immoral deeds of Herod and

Herodias were legal according to the laws of the land, but they were terribly wrong and defiling according to the laws of God. Divorce is a very defiling practice. No one can practice it without terribly defiling themselves.

2. The Destructiveness of the Practice

The lives of Herod and Herodias demonstrate pungently that divorce brings havoc wherever it is found. It is strange that we legalize it and encourage it with our laws today, for it is common knowledge that divorce leaves the landscape of society strewn with a carnage of wrecked humanity. Divorce in the lives of Herod and Herodias reaped destruction in two very prominent ways: it destroyed people and it destroyed peace.

It destroyed people. Primarily we are thinking of John the Baptist here. It was divorce and remarriage which resulted in his losing his head to the executioner. “John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife [Herodias]. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not [at that time, but was able to later]” ([Mark 6:18,19](#)). Herod also wanted to kill John. “He would have put him to death, [but could not at that time because] he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet” ([Matthew 14:5](#)).

“Lust dwells hard by hate. Sensual crimes and cruelty are closely akin” (Maclaren). Immorality (which is what divorce and remarriage is) and bloodshed go hand in hand. Never forget that fact. David and Bathsheba illustrate that truth as do Herod and Herodias, for their immorality led to the death of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband. So many murders today are related to im-morality. These murders are not just the violent killing of adults because of some immoral triangle or like situation, but these murders also include abortion which is primarily a product of immorality. When folk do not respect the beginning of life, they will not respect the ending of life. Immorality is disrespect for the beginning of life; murder is disrespect for the ending of life.

It destroyed peace. We have never heard a divorced person describe their divorce in any terms other than significant trauma. You cannot break such an important Divine law without great trauma. Sin does not promote tranquillity, but it promotes trauma. Divorce is a great disturber of the peace.

The immoral marriage ways of Herod and Herodias certainly demonstrated the fact that divorce is the great disturber of peace. Just one area of the loss of peace because of Herod’s divorce will show this fact. It is the matter of the loss of peace between his country and Aretas’ country. History tells us that when Herod divorced Aretas’ daughter, Aretas was so upset that he eventually attacked Herod and destroyed nearly all of Herod’s army. Had not Rome intervened, it would have been even worse. Herod’s land bordered the kingdom of Aretas. His marriage to Aretas’ daughter had strengthened the peace between the two nations; but when he divorced Aretas’ daughter, it really broke the peace between those two countries and illustrated the truth that divorce destroys peace. You cannot play loose with

your morals and promote peace. Peace is established by purity, not by immoral pursuits.

3. The Denouncing of the Practice

What Herod and Herodias did was wrong. Their divorce and remarriage was just plain wickedness. The world will not condemn such actions, but both the Baptist and the Bible condemn this sort of practice.

The Baptist condemns it. The response of John the Baptist to Herod's marriage to Herodias was plain and simple: "It is not lawful" ([Mark 6:18](#)). Herod had no trouble understanding the message, neither did Herodias. John left no doubt about where he stood and what God said about the matter.

It had to take great courage for John to be so plain and outspoken on where he stood in regards to Herod's immoral marriage. John was not naïve. He could not help but know that his outspoken condemnation of Herod would greatly imperil himself. But he did not let the peril pollute his message. Oh, for more men like John the Baptist in our pulpits!

But as gallant a performance as John gave in indicting Herod for his immoral ways, John would be sharply criticized today for his rebuke of Herod. Many men of the cloth, even in our fundamental circles, would question condemning sin as bluntly and plainly as John condemned the unholy marriage of this ungodly public official. The critics would say that such denouncing of sin was fanatical, crude, ill-mannerly, and that one should be more decorous and dignified in speaking with public officials. But unlike those who oppose an outspoken condemnation of evil, John was in the business of raising the standards of conduct, not lowering them. His rebuke of Herod was a courageous and needed rebuke. A. T. Robertson said, "It was a blunt and brave thing that John said. It cost him his head; but it is better to have a head like John the Baptist and lose it than to have an ordinary head and keep it."

The Bible condemns it. John only had the Old Testament to support his condemnation of the actions of Herod and Herodias. The Old Testament is enough to thoroughly condemn the practice, of course; but today we also have the strong and plain condemnation of divorce and remarriage in the New Testament to support the condemnation of this evil. We will cite here from both the Old and New Testaments some things God has to say about the matter which will certainly show that John the Baptist spoke the mind of God when he denounced Herod and Herodias for their immoral ways.

We will begin by noting an Old Testament passage, [Malachi 2:16](#). In it we are told that God hates divorce. "For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away." Anything that God hates we need to condemn. All those folk looking for ways to justify divorce need to remember that divorce is hated by God. There can be no wisdom whatever in trying to justify that which God unequivocally hates.

In the New Testament, Christ condemned this practice of divorce and remarriage when He said, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery

against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery” ([Mark 10:11,12](#), cp. [Luke 16:18](#)). Also in the New Testament, Paul condemned divorce and remarriage of divorced people when he said, “For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law” ([Romans 7:2,3](#); cp. [1 Corinthians 7:39](#)).

Another important New Testament passage indicting divorce and remarriage is found in [Matthew 19](#). In that chapter, Jesus, in speaking with some critical Pharisees, really condemned divorce by showing what sort of character it is that seeks divorce. His condemnation on divorce came as a result of a question asked by the Pharisees. They asked Jesus, “Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?” ([Matthew 19:7](#)). It was obvious to the Pharisees that Christ was opposed to divorce, but they evidently thought they could trap Him by asking why Moses permitted it. Moses, of course, was the great man of great men as far as the Pharisees were concerned. Jesus gave a most enlightening answer. He said, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered [permitted] you to put away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” ([Matthew 19:8](#)). From the beginning of creation God forbid divorce. The fact that it occurred anyway was simply a result of the “hardness of your hearts.”

Divorce is a result of hard hearts, and that fact certainly condemns the practice. If there is a dominant characteristic present in divorced people, it is hardness. Divorce manifests a lack of love—a hard heart is not a loving heart. Divorce manifests a cruel heart—a hard heart is not a kind heart. Divorce brings untold suffering upon children, as an example. It is a cruel trick on children. Divorce manifests stubbornness—divorced people are hard to get along with as anyone knows who tries to work with them. That is why they get divorced, for they cannot get along with their mate. Divorce manifests selfishness—a hard heart is indifferent to other people’s feelings and needs.

One cannot read the Bible honestly without becoming aware of the plain fact that God disapproves of divorce and of divorced people getting remarried. The conduct of Herod and Herodias was not lawful in God’s sight—neither is any divorce or the remarriage of divorced people today!

4. The Defending of the Practice

John’s message against divorce and remarriage certainly was not received well by Herod and Herodias. But such a message will always have reception problems. Divorce and remarriage are generally defended by man, not denounced. It is much more likely to be accepted than rejected. Proof of that fact in our land is that more and more laws are being made to accommodate those who want to get divorced. We do not have more and more laws made to prevent and condemn divorce. Further proof of the acceptableness of divorce and remarriage in our land is found in the fact that you can be divorced and remarried and

still be a high official in the church—even a pastor. And you can be divorced and remarried and be a very popular president of our country. So the defending of divorce and remarriage should not surprise us; it is an extremely popular practice.

We will note here two prominent characteristics about the defending of divorce and remarriage. It is frequently defended viciously, and it is just as frequently defended pervertedly.

It is defended viciously. Herod and Herodias demonstrate this rather obviously. Oppose their marriage and you jeopardize your life. Their vicious attitude needs to be paid attention to more. It is not unique to Herod and Herodias to defend their unholy behavior viciously. Oh, many today may not kill the one who opposes divorce and remarriage, but they will be surprisingly cruel to opposers. Divorced people are not going to be characterized by tolerance and kindness. Anyone who would break the holy vow of marriage has a hard heart, as we noted above; and one of the ways that will be seen is in their vicious retaliation against those who speak out against their unholy marriage practices.

It would be nice if only the Herods and Herodias of the world were vicious in their opposition to the opposers of divorce. But this vicious defending of divorce and remarriage shows up in church, too—and in our so-called conservative, fundamental, Bible-believing churches. No pastor can take the strong stand of John the Baptist in his church without incurring great problems—unless his church does not have divorce in it. People who call themselves Christian will rise up against the pastor and attack him with vehemence when he opposes divorce. If they cannot throw him out, they will lead a great group of people out of the church. They will get hotter about the pastor’s opposition to divorce than they will about anything else in the church. Herod and Herodias were more upset about John the Baptist indicting their divorce and remarriage than they were about any other sin. It was this action of John the Baptist that upset them the most. Divorced people will generally be much more sensitive about the criticism of their divorce than criticism about anything else in their lives.

It is defended pervertedly. Herod and Herodias defended their immoral ways through murder. Professing Christians do not murder the preacher today, but they do murder the Scriptures by perverting the Word of God to defend divorce and remarriage. They ignore the texts of Scripture which are so plain in their condemning of divorce and remarriage and instead emphasize “loophole” texts with strange and unscholarly interpretations to justify doing what God hates.

One favorite text used to justify remarriage is [2 Corinthians 5:17](#), “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” When applying this to remarriage, the argument is that a person who was divorced when unsaved can be remarried after he is saved; for he is now a new creature. That is a bunch of nonsense. He is a new creature—but where? Obviously not physically and obviously not in human family relationships. But anyway this verse is not even talking about divorce.

Why use it in the matter of divorce and avoid the ones that do talk plainly about divorce (unless, of course, you are trying desperately to find some way of skirting around God's law)? And if they are going to take this verse and apply it to divorce and remarriage, why not take the next verse, too, which says God has "given to us a ministry of reconciliation" ([2 Corinthians 5:18](#)). Let divorced people give themselves to a ministry of reconciliation with their former mates. But when you interpret [verse 18](#) like that, they will say the verse is talking about salvation—not about the subject of divorce. True, and so is [verse 17](#)!

Some of the most perverted Scripture twisting that we have seen to support divorce and remarriage has been done by a Landmark Baptist minister (who is, of course, divorced and remarried). In several books he has written, he uses [Isaiah 50:1](#) and [Jeremiah 3:8](#) as support texts for divorce. In those texts, God describes His relationship with sinning Israel in terms of divorce. Disregarding the obvious symbolism of the texts, this minister proclaims God as being a divorced person. This, in his twisted thinking, gives Divine dignity and approval to divorce. Furthermore, he uses these texts to argue that divorced men can be in the ministry—which is contrary to the Scripture. His argument is that we surely would not disqualify God from service; therefore, since God is divorced we should not disqualify divorced men from service either. This kind of Scripture perverting is blasphemy of the worst kind. We could use that same sort of immoral reasoning to justify having several women at one time; for God said of two women, Aholah and Aholibah—who symbolically represented Judah (Southern-Kingdom) and Samaria (Northern Kingdom)—"They were mine" ([Ezekiel 23:4](#)).-Yes, divorced people encourage some really sick interpretation of the Scripture to justify their immoral conduct.

The so-called "exception" texts which many use to justify divorce and remarriage are the two texts in Matthew which appear on the surface to allow divorce if there has been immorality in one of the mates. [Matthew 5:32](#) says, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery; and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery" (cp. [Matthew 19:9](#)). Significantly, these two texts are only found in Matthew; and each makes the exception clause "fornication," a term often used concerning sexual relations involving an unmarried person. As most Bible students know well, Matthew was written with the Jew in mind. The Jewish marriage arrangement had a "betrothal" period of approximately a year which occurred before the actual consummation of the marriage. During that time the couple did not see each other. The papers had been signed, and the endowment money had been paid, but the consummation of the marriage and the public marriage ceremony and celebration had not taken place. The man and woman stayed apart; they did not live together. The girl went back home to live with her parents, and the boy did the same. We believe it is during this period that our Lord was speaking about in the exception verses. An illustration that will support this conclusion is found in the first chapter of Matthew where Joseph pondered putting Mary away, for she was "found with child" ([Matthew 1:18](#)). Joseph was not married to Mary yet as we define marriage—but was simply in the betrothal period (Ibid.). Even after

Christ was in His public ministry some thirty years later, folk still thought Mary had gotten pregnant during that time and in a backhanded way let Christ know they believed He was indeed born of “fornication” ([John 8:41](#)).

Many good men of God have used these Matthew texts to justify divorce and remarriage in some cases. We wonder how many of them realize that Erasmus, a prominent Roman Catholic leader in Luther’s day, was the one who first espoused the “exception” theory back in 1519 which was later embraced by the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1648. The early church, however, did not understand it as did Erasmus. They allowed for no remarriage unless a mate had died. Would they ever be shocked if they walked into our churches today!

If we are going to defend divorce and remarriage by exception passages, we are going to back ourselves into a very bad hermeneutic corner. For this unsound interpreting of the Scripture will also justify denying all the major doctrines of the faith. Every major doctrine of the faith can be countered by a few verses here and there which seem to have an exception statement in them that can be twisted to deny the doctrine. But do not build important doctrines and principles upon thin ice. Exception texts must not be given preference over the plain texts of the Scripture if we are going to handle the Scripture properly. In such an important matter as marriage, let us build our convictions on the plain, obvious texts of Scripture! Furthermore, let us try to lift the standards of morality rather than look for ways to justify the lowering of them. That was the work of John the Baptist, and it is a much needed work for our day.

B. THE PARTICULARS OF THE BEHEADING

The death of John the Baptist was not unplanned. It did not happen because of a spur-of-the-moment idea. Herodias “would have killed him [sooner], but she could not” ([Mark 6:19](#)), for circumstances would not permit it. Herod was the main circumstance keeping her from obtaining her murderous wishes, for she needed Herod’s cooperation to kill John. Herod also wanted to kill John, but “when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet” ([Matthew 14:5](#)). Herod’s desire to kill John was thwarted by political concerns. He could not afford politically to have an uproar over his actions, and that is what he feared would happen if he killed John, for the people revered John. But when two vicious, immoral people have blood in their eye, they will not let their bloody wishes rest. So “when a convenient day was come” ([Mark 6:21](#)), the execution of John the Baptist occurred.

“Convenient” is the key word here in understanding the fact that the murder of John was not something thought of on the spur of the moment but, in fact, was planned. Vincent says of convenient, “Convenient for Herodias’ purpose,” and then quotes Grotius, “Opportune for the insidious woman, who hoped, through wine, lust, and the concurrence of sycophants, to be able to easily overcome the wavering mind of her husband.”

Herod’s desire to kill John was not as strong as the desire of Herodias, for he feared the

people. Herodias' desire had no such hesitation. It was only circumstances which prevented her from killing John, but now she had the "convenient" situation in Herod's birthday celebration which would provide her the needed circumstances to manipulate Herod into ordering the decree to execute John.

In considering the particulars of the beheading of John the Baptist, we will note two main aspects of it: the occasion for the beheading and the ordering of the beheading.

1. The Occasion for the Beheading

"And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates [men] of Galilee" ([Mark 6:21](#)). This would not be the usual birthday party which we think of today which includes simple things as the birthday cake, ice cream, a few innocent games, and then the opening of presents. This was a grand festival put on by a ruler. Herod would celebrate his birthday in grand style. The celebration would be held at the great palace at Machaerus and would include dignitaries, dining, and dancing—all which put Herod in the frame of mind to be willing to do what Herodias wanted him to do, namely, to order the beheading of John the Baptist.

Dignitaries. Herod invited "his lords, high captains, and chief estates [men] of Galilee." Herod's guest list included all the important dignitaries of his government. It would be a large and prestigious group and would feed Herod's pride, for all the officials would be fawning over Herod as is the usual case at such gatherings. This would cause Herod to want to impress them more, and such a situation only served to encourage Herod to do a terrible deed of ordering the slaying of John the Baptist. When men are so interested in themselves and earnestly seek the praise of men, they are only setting up themselves to do gross evil. Pride is a trap that produces the vilest of deeds; and because of the many high official government guests—which so played on his pride—he did what he should not have done, namely, order the execution of John the Baptist.

Dining. The birthday party was a sumptuous feast. Food would be in abundance, and wine would flow freely. Herodias would recognize her opportunity in all of this. Let her man be surrounded by high officials (which he would want to impress), and full of wine, and he will be in no shape to make a decent, moral decision. The conditioning of Herod for his dastardly deed of killing John the Baptist was being accomplished most successfully by the celebration. The celebration was destroying his resistance to taking John's life.

Christians need to beware of all such occasions, for they can lower their spiritual temperature and make themselves easy prey for temptation. They have no business at such feasts, parties, or celebrations where the emphasis is on satisfying the appetites of the flesh in a base way. Office Christmas parties, business dinners, political gatherings, school proms, and even some family reunions which include the unwholesome atmosphere of drinking and carousing are occasions to avoid like the plague. To be in attendance at these affairs is only to endanger all that is good and wholesome in one's life. Just as Herod was weakened by the

feast to do evil, so similar occasions can ensnare God's people and cause them to fall. But if God's people avoid these sinful situations, they will defeat the devil's plan.

Dancing. No state occasion like this is without entertainment. And typical of Herod's character, it would be lewd, sensual, and immorally exciting. Herod's guests (they were men, for the men dined together) would be treated to a dancing exhibition. The dancer was Salome, the daughter of Herodias. "The daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him" ([Mark 6:22](#)). To please this audience meant her dance had to be immorally suggestive. We have plenty of those type of dancers today found in the night clubs of the land that only dance to inspire base lust.

When a dancer pleased her audience in those days, she was entitled to a reward. Vincent says, "Salome had . . . perform[ed] the part of an almeah or common dancer, and could claim her reward." Herod was only too glad to give her a reward. Immorally inspired by the dancing and having his judgment impaired by the influence of wine and wanting to impress his guests, Herod said, "Ask of me whatever thou wilt, and I will give it thee . . . Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom" ([Mark 6:22,23](#)). This was a magnanimous reward. It was far too much of a reward. It did not reflect due remuneration but reflected intoxication—intoxication with wine, lust, and pride. The too liberal of an offer would get Herod in big, big trouble.

Salome "went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask?" ([Mark 6:24](#)). Salome going to her mother like this tells us why Salome did the dancing for these men. For Salome to be the entertaining dancer was very unusual. This sort of lewd dancing was not done by members of the royal family but was normally done by hired, professional dancing harlots who made this their business. It was considered below royal dignity to be such a dancer. However, Herodias must control the outcome. So no professional dancer is hired. Salome will dance, for she would consult with Herodias about the reward—something no hired dancer would do. So when she was asked by Salome what to ask of Herod, Herodias was most ready with the answer. "And she [Herodias] said, The head of John the Baptist. And she [Salome] came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by [means 'at once' in the Greek text, kjv rendering is most out of date, for it means just the opposite] in a charger [platter] the head of John the Baptist" ([Mark 6:24,25](#)). This was more than just a request, it now became a demand. "Give me at once" is the language of demand. Herodias knew all along what she was going to do here. She understood her man, she knew what the dancing would do, and she knew how to use the reward to accomplish her deadly desire. But she also knew she must move in a hurry before he changed his mind; so the request became a command to insure action before Herod could change his mind.

What a pathetic character was Herod. Given over to base appetites, he could be manipulated by them to do the worst of deeds. Whenever a man sells himself to the evil appetites of the flesh, he is terribly vulnerable to vile deeds. He has by yielding to them made

himself a servant of The Serpent, the devil. And before his life is over, he will make a terrible fool of himself through despicable doings. Let us learn from this to control our passions and not to be controlled by them. Let us do as Paul did, “I keep under [discipline] my body, and bring it into subjection” ([1 Corinthians 9:27](#)).

2. The Ordering of the Beheading

The request which Salome made, as instructed by Herodias, led to the ordering of the terrible deed of beheading John the Baptist. It was the worst order Herod ever gave. We note the sorrow over the order, the sanctioning of the order, and the silence about the order to behead John the Baptist.

The sorrow over the order. Herod did not like the request and “was exceedingly sorry” ([Mark 6:26](#)). But the sorrow is qualified. Was it sorrow caused by a stricken conscience over murder? Hardly, for Herod wanted to kill John. The sorrow then had to do with what might be the reaction of the people. Herod had heretofore not killed John because of his fear of the people, which we have already noted. They could riot and cause a lot of trouble for his domain, get him in trouble with Rome, and jeopardize his position. Such prospects would not make him happy. Herod is not sorry about sin but sorry for what may be the consequences of doing the deed. It was not a holy principle that moved Herod to sorrow; it was jeopardizing his political interests that upset him.

Much sorrow regarding evil is of this kind. It is often mistaken for true remorse over evil. But this sorrow over evil is that of getting caught or of having to pay some price one did not want to pay. Like the world’s love, the world’s sorrow has no godly character to it at all.

The sanctioning of the order. Herod’s initial hesitation to issue the execution order was more than compensated for by his feelings in another direction. So “for his oath’s sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her” ([Mark 6:26](#)). Herod would sanction this deed in his mind by the fact that he had made an oath in front of his guests which his pride insisted he dare not break. He did not want to lose face in front of all these dignitaries. What would they think of him if he backed down on his word? Herod would be afraid they would laugh at him and mock him. So his pride works overtime, and he becomes very religious about keeping his oath. His thinking is that he must be a man of his word and show his guests what a strong character he has. No mind as to the wretched deed his oath has gotten him into; that evil does not count. The big thing with him is that he must not fail to keep his oath. And so before his guests would have a chance to think he was even wavering in keeping his oath, he “immediately . . . sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought; and he went and beheaded him in prison, And brought his head in a charger [platter], and gave it to the damsel, and the damsel gave it to her mother” ([Mark 6:27,28](#)).

What sick thinking this is of Herod to give such a priority to his oath. Pride befuddles the reasoning powers of man. “Herod is an illustration . . . of a conscience fantastically

sensitive while it is dead to real crimes. He has no twinges for his sin with Herodias, and no effective ones at killing John, but he thinks it would be wrong to break his oath . . . We often make compensation for easy indulgence in great sins by fussy scrupulosity about little faults, and like Herod, had rather commit murder than not be polite to visitors” (Maclaren). This same perverted conscience behavior was demonstrated by the Jewish leaders when Christ was crucified. They “went not into the judgment hall, lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the passover” ([John 18:28](#)). They had practiced bribery (they paid Judas to betray Jesus), plotted the murder of Christ, lied, sought false witnesses, and sanctioned the unlawful smiting of Christ in court all without compunction. But then they made a big deal of some trivial ceremonial defilement rule which was entirely man made. It is the straining at the gnat and swallowing of the camel ([Matthew 23:24](#)) which is often exhibited by people of gross character. Beware of a religion which emphasizes the trivial and gets sidetracked from the great truths of God. As example, in some of our churches divorce and remarriage will be most tolerated; but if the haircut on a man is not just right, he is considered akin to an apostate.

The silence about the order. Notice that those guests who sat with Herod did not protest the killing. What a rotten bunch they were. But we should not be surprised, for they were also pleased with the immoral dancing of Salome ([Mark 6:22](#)). Folk who delight in such evil entertainment definitely have troubles in properly protesting sin. They would not lift up one finger of protest, not even one gentle remonstrance. Unlike John the Baptist, these guests had no character to oppose evil, not even the most terrible, bloody, grisly deeds. And what made it worse was that they were the high officials of the land. Like officials in our land who vote for abortion, homosexuals, alcohol, gambling and other like sins, these men had no honor where it really counted.

The failure of these men to protest the terrible deed will be held against them. True, Herod gave the order for the beheading of John; and Herodias inspired it. But these two are not the only ones who will share in the guilt. The guests who could have protested—but did not—also have much blood on their hands.

The silence of these guests of Herod reminds us of the silence of many church members when evil exists in the church amongst its members. As an example, when someone in the congregation vents their unholy wrath against the pastor and calls for his ouster, these folk sit silently and refuse to say a thing in defense of the pastor or in denunciation of the cruel and unjust attitude of the dissident. And yet on Sunday they sing enthusiastically, “Stand up, stand up for Jesus.” They do not know the first thing about standing up for that which is right and true. Though they may be elected officers in the church, like Herod’s officers, they have spiritual lockjaw when it comes to speaking up against evil action. Their minister can be sentenced to ouster, but they say and do nothing. They will be accountable, however, for the evil that goes on in the church even though they did not plot and plan it; for they did not protest it when it was made known to them.

C. THE POSTLUDE OF THE BEHEADING

We must pay attention to what happened after this beheading took place. We will miss some valuable lessons if we do not. We note three things which followed the beheading: the pallbearers of John, the parting of Jesus, and the punishment of Herod.

1. The Pallbearers of John

“And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus” ([Matthew 14:12](#)). It would be hard to find a more noble performance by pallbearers than those who took care of John’s body. They were both brave and wise in their action.

They were brave. It took a good deal of courage to go to the palace at Machaerus and pick up the headless body of John the Baptist. With life meaning so little, they could be the next ones to be beheaded for all they knew. The capriciousness of the rulers of the day justifies such a conclusion. Anyone who would identify himself with John the Baptist in a friendly way was certainly no friend of Herod and Herodias. But these disciples bravely went for the body anyway. Like the brave members of Samson’s family who rescued Samson’s corpse from the land of the Philistines ([Judges 16:31](#)) and like the “valiant men” of Jabesh-gilead who went into the enemy territory to retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons who had been killed in battle by the Philistines ([1 Samuel 31:11–13](#)), these loyal disciples of John boldly went into the den of the lion and retrieved the headless body of John to give him a decent burial. The courage of John’s disciples shames those today who are often unwilling to suffer even a bit of embarrassment in order to do honor to God.

They were wise. How beautiful is the statement: “and went and told Jesus.” The disciples did their duty, which had to be a very hard one to do both from the standpoint of peril, which we just noted and from the standpoint of emotion. But they did their duty anyway. Then they went and told Christ all about it. They took their troubles to the Lord. It is an example we need to follow. We need to take our troubles to the Lord and tell Him all about them. We need to heed the exhortation of the hymn “Tell it to Jesus.” The hymn tells the weary, the heavy hearted, the troubled, the fearful, and the anxious to “tell it to Jesus.” We tell a lot of people our troubles today which does us no good at all. In fact, we often tell the wrong people and make our problems worse. But telling it to Jesus will never make things worse. These disciples of John did the right thing. Let us do likewise when we are faced with troubles.

2. The Parting of Jesus

When John was put in prison, we noticed one of the consequences was that Jesus departed from the area. The same consequence occurred when John was beheaded. “When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart” ([Matthew 14:13](#)). Though Christ was at the time in Galilee some distance from Herod, He moved even

farther away after the beheading of John the Baptist. The “desert place” where He went was according to Luke “a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida” ([Luke 9:10](#)). This would be in the land under which Philip the tetrarch ruled, not the area Herod ruled. So Christ departed from Herod’s territory because of the be-heading of John.

Again, as in the imprisonment of John, we would be reminded that when you deal unkindly with God’s servants, you will drive away God’s blessings. What a fool Herod was. Right in his own province was the very Son of God doing all kinds of great deeds for the people Herod ruled. What benevolence Herod could have done for the people under his rule had he made Christ welcome in his province so Christ could bless his people. But Herod was too busy mistreating God’s servant and lost the great blessing of the land.

Many are the nations and civilizations which had great men of God in their midst who could have been a great blessing to the people, but the powers that be persecuted them and thus drove out their greatest blessing. The same is true with many churches. God sent to them a preacher who could bless them spiritually. But they meanly rejected him and mistreated him and, as a result, lost untold blessing—but they are so blind and ignorant of their great loss.

3. The Punishment of Herod

Herod did not have to wait until the grave before he began to suffer judgment for this atrocious deed of beheading John the Baptist. When we go back to the beginning of our text which introduces the beheading event, we discover some of the punishment Herod received shortly after his beheading of John. “And king Herod heard of him [Christ] . . . and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him. Others said, It is Elias [Elijah]. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I be-headed; he is risen from the dead” ([Mark 6:14–16](#)).

Poor Herod, he was haunted by the death of John the Baptist. When he heard word of Christ’s mighty works, he could only think it was John raised from the dead. Herod was slow in learning about Christ, but political leaders are seldom “up” on spiritual things. They may know all the ins and outs about politics and who is in power and who is out of power and how to stay in power. But they are woefully ignorant of what is going on spiritually. But when Herod found out about Christ, it was too much for him. Others argued that Christ was one of the prophets, but Herod would not be so persuaded. He insisted that it was John resurrected from the dead.

Knowing how these rulers feared retaliation from their enemies, the fear that gripped Herod could be very great. The face looking at him from the platter which was covered with blood oozing from the severed head could haunt him day and night. Like Cain, he could cry out in agony, “My punishment is greater than I can bear” ([Genesis 4:13](#)). Herod was just beginning to realize what the consequences were of going against God.

Secular history tells us other experiences of Herod and his family which would show

the hand of God’s revenge on him. Herod was urged by Herodias (who as we noted was ambitious for vain glory) to ask Rome for the title of king (though called “king” in [Mark 6:14](#), it was not an official title then but needed the approval of the Roman senate to be official—the most fitting title for Herod was “fox” the one Christ gave him in [Luke 13:32](#)). So he made a trip to Rome for that purpose. But instead of gaining the title of king, the Roman Senate banished him to France. There he and Herodias “both perished miserably” (Bickersteth). Tradition says that Salome died a unique death falling through the ice and being caught in such a way that the sharp edges of the ice nearly decapitated her in killing her. Sin pays, but what terrible wages. But even if wicked men do not suffer retribution in this life—and some of them seem to escape retributive suffering—think of the terrible hell they will suffer. It will make any suffering in this life seem inconsequential. Truly, “the way of transgressors is hard” ([Proverbs 13:15](#)).

XI. BOUQUETS

[LUKE 7:24–28](#); [JOHN 5:35, 10:41](#); [LUKE 3:15](#); [MATTHEW 16:13,14](#); [MARK 6:14–16](#)

WHEN A PERSON dies, flowers are generally sent to the home or funeral parlor by their friends to give honor to the deceased. In the previous chapter, we focused on the death of John the Baptist; and so in this chapter we want to look at some of the bouquets given John. These are not the kind of bouquets that will wilt in a few days, as most flowers do; but these are bouquets which will endure throughout eternity. These bouquets are commendations concerning John and his ministry. John got his share of brickbats in life; but in these commendations we will see that he also got some great and deserving bouquets which are very inspiring and instructive for us today.

The commendations we will examine are for the most part from spot references to John found here and there in the Gospels. Not all of the commendations which we will consider were made after he died—some were made while he was still alive. In several cases, it is not possible to determine if they were made when he was alive or when he had already died. But whether alive or dead, it matters not, the message is the same.

To study these commendations given John, we will divide them into four bouquets: the contrasts in John, the consecration of John, the confirmation of John, and the confusion about John.

A. THE CONTRASTS IN JOHN

The largest bouquet and the most extensive commendation given John was given by Christ right after the imprisoned John had sent messengers to inquire if Christ was indeed the Messiah. The bouquets given John in this incident were presented in the form of three

repeated questions. Three times Christ asked the crowd, “What went ye out . . . to see?” ([Luke 7:24,25,26](#)). These three questions introduced some views of John which people with not the best motives for hearing John had of him, and they were views which Christ wanted to utterly refute.

The “see” addressed the poor motive many had in going to hear John the Baptist. Matthew Henry said that the crowd went to see John “rather out of curiosity than for conscience.” Like many attending church today, they attended just to see and to be seen. They attended to have something to talk about rather than to have something to think about. They attended more for entertainment than for edification. Folk with such motives would be the first to think poorly of John. So Christ, in bestowing this great bouquet of praise on John, contrasted their views to Christ’s view which was the correct view.

To look at the Christ’s comments about John, we will note the character of Christ’s comments and the character of John’s conduct.

1. The Character of Christ’s Comments

Christ’s comments about John were encouraging, needed, preferred, hidden, and reciprocal.

First, *they were encouraging*. Christ spoke His highest accolades of John when John was at his lowest in discouragement. F. B. Meyer said, “It was when John had fallen beneath his usual level, below high-water mark, that Jesus uttered his warmest and most generous words of appreciation.” This fact has to encourage all God’s people that God does not forsake us when we are down and discouraged.

Second, *they were needed*. This praise of John was especially needed at this time, for the crowd around Christ that day could easily entertain doubts concerning John after they heard his messengers inquire of Christ if He were indeed the Messiah. Christ would put away quickly the doubts of the crowd and see to it that John the Baptist was held in due honor by these people. Christ did not want John’s inquiry to be construed in any way to reflect dishonor upon his person and ministry which had so excelled for God’s honor in days past. “We must honor good men; we must not magnify the occasional weaknesses which must appear even in the noblest lives. Envious men exaggerate these little blemishes; the world loves to dwell upon the faults of God’s people” (A. Lukyn Williams).

Third, *they were preferred*. Christ’s compliments about John are certainly to be preferred to the praise of the world though to have the compliments of Christ generally means you will be cast out by the world. Frederic Godet called Christ’s commendation of John the “funeral oration” of John; for not long after Christ gave this commendation, John was beheaded. The beheading indicated what men thought of John, but this great bouquet of commendation from Christ indicated what Christ thought of John. Better to be beheaded by the Herods of the day and given bouquets from Christ than the other way around. But sad to say, most men, even professing Christians, seem to prefer the world’s accolades more than the praise of God.

Fourth, *they were hidden*. Interestingly and very instructively, Christ did not utter this great commendation of John until “the messengers of John were departed” ([Luke 7:24](#)). These messengers had been sent by John to ask Christ if He were indeed the Messiah. Christ had given ample instruction to the messengers of John to encourage John’s faith, but He did not let them hear the high accolades He made of John. He kept the praise hidden from John. Immediately, some will ask why Christ did not want John to hear these commendations. The answer is that “He would give him no cause for pride by what He said . . . He desired to give his friend no additional temptation during these lonely hours” (F. B. Meyer). Pride is a devil. Matthew Henry said, “They who in other things are mortified to the world, yet cannot well bear their own praise. Pride is a corrupt humor, which we must not feed either in others or in ourselves.”

Christ is so different than we are. We praise people in front of their faces; but then behind their back, we speak ill of them. Christ was just the opposite. He sent a mild rebuke to John— “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me” ([Luke 7:23](#))—but then spoke high praise of John behind his back so to speak. One of the great tests of our faith is to serve the Lord when we hear no praise and receive no honors for our work. There will be plenty of praise and honor in heaven when the battle is over, but those who would serve the Lord will discover that their praise will often be little in this life. If they want to serve well, they will have to experience more brickbats than bouquets.

Fifth, *they were reciprocal*. When John the Baptist was in the limelight and the main attraction, he gave profuse praise of Jesus Christ Who was then unknown and in obscurity. Now when Christ is the main attraction and John is out of the limelight and shut up in prison, Christ reciprocates and gives John high praise. This reciprocation principle is ever at work. “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven” ([Matthew 10:32,33](#)); and “Them that honor me I will honor, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed” ([1 Samuel 2:30](#)). If we want honor from God, we must honor God. A good many folk today have the warped idea that they can live as they please in this life and yet be honored by God with a nice place in heaven when they die. It does not work that way at all, however. You do not get John’s praise from Christ unless you have honored Christ as John did.

2. The Character of John’s Conduct

In Christ’s comments about John, He spoke of three areas of John’s conduct which were outstanding. They are the steadfastness of John, the self-denial of John, and the superiority of John.

The steadfastness of John. The first question Christ asked the people was, “What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?” ([Luke 7:24](#)). The answer to this question was a very strongly implied “no!” For one of John’s most outstanding characteristics was his faithfulness to stand true and straight at all times, something we

noted previously from [John 1:35](#) in our seventh chapter.

The reed referred to here is the “*Arundo donax*” which is “a very tall cane, growing twelve feet high, with a magnificent panicle of blossom at the top, and so slender and yielding that it will lie perfectly flat under a gust of wind, and [after the wind ceases] immediately resume its upright position” (A. Lukyn Williams). Many people are like this reed in their stand. Which ever direction the wind blows, they bow in that direction. Politicians are like this. They lean the way in which the wind of votes blows. Preachers are often like this, too; they lean whichever way the wind will blow in a big crowd. They adjust their messages and practices to please the parishioners rather than to please God.

But John the Baptist was of different character. He stood straight no matter which way the wind blew. He was not “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” ([Ephesians 4:14](#)). Instead of a reed, he was like a mighty oak who stood straight and unmoved by the circumstances. It made no difference where others stood; John stood true. It made no difference what sort of pressure was brought to bear upon John; he continued to stand upright; he would not bow or bend. He would not compromise with evil even if it meant his being bound in prison. He indicted sin in the religious leaders as well as in the common folk; he indicted the court of Herod as well as the crowds of hypocrites. He cowered before no one.

Some may be inclined to think John was like a reed in his doubt of Jesus’ identity in his last days. But such a doubt was not the real John. As F. B. Meyer said so well, “Heaven judges not by passing mood but by the general tenor and trend of a man’s life; not by the expression of a doubt, caused by accidents which may be explained, but by the soul of man within him, which is as much deeper than the emotions as the heart of the ocean is deeper than the cloud-shadows which hurry across its surface . . . the Lord judges us by that which is deepest, most permanent, most constant and prevalent with us; by the ideal we seek to apprehend; by the decision and choice of our soul.” John’s doubts were not deep seated; they were the ripples on top of the water, the current underneath never changed. Jesus, Himself, affirms that fact here.

The self-denial of John. The second question Christ asked to help show the true character of John was, “What went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appparelled, and live delicately, are in kings’ courts” ([Luke 7:25](#)). Here is another contrast which John was to others—especially to others who doted on high fashion, the esteem of men, and the passions of the flesh. John was not clothed in the latest fashion and in excessively expensive clothing. He, in contrast, “had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle [belt] about his loins [waist]” ([Matthew 3:4](#)). His clothing not only spoke of his office of a prophet; but most importantly, it also spoke of his self-denial which he practiced in order to serve the Lord. It emphasized that his interests were in something other than the mere things of this earth.

It is not necessarily a sin to wear nice clothes. That is not the teaching of Christ here.

The teaching is that those who put a great emphasis on parading around in the finest of clothes are those who are chiefly interested in a life of ease and pleasure far removed from gallant service and dedication to Christ. To be “gorgeously apparelled” ([Luke 7:25](#)) spoke of luxurious living which is foreign to true spirituality, and the word “delicately” means “to lead a voluptuous life, to give oneself up to pleasure” (Vincent). It spoke of a degraded life style given up to the appetites of the flesh. Therefore, to put a great emphasis on expensive and exceptional clothing indicated a person was given excessively to the passions of life and had little interest in things of true value, such as character, the welfare of the soul, heaven, the Word, and Christ.

We noted this self-denial characteristic of John in one of the earlier chapters of this book. He brought his body under control and yielded not to the siren temptations of the flesh. He was no Herod given to base lusts, living in luxury in the palace. He was no Pharisee strutting around in religious robes of finery seeking to impress men, by his gorgeous array, of his piety so that he could obtain the praise of men while all the time he was serving the passions of the flesh. John knew how to mortify the flesh. And “they who have lived a life of mortification, are least likely to be driven off from their religion by persecution” (Matthew Henry).

We have need of much more emphasis on this business of self-denial among Christians than what we are seeing in the lives of professing Christians and in what we are hearing from our pulpits today. F. B. Meyer said, “Too many of us are inclined to put on the soft raiment of self-indulgence and luxury. We are slaves of fashion, or we are perpetually considering what we shall eat, what we shall drink, and with what we shall be clothed: or we act as though we supposed that life consisted in the number of things we possessed, and the variety of servants that waited upon us: whereas the exact contrary is the case. The real happiness of life consists not in increasing our possessions but in limiting our wants.” John is a contrast to the soft-raiment crowd, and it is a contrast that is most commendable in regards to character. Would that more saints demonstrated this contrast to the ways of the world.

The superiority of John. The third and last thing Christ asked the crowd was, “What when ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” ([Luke 7:26–28](#)).

The superiority of John is emphasized in this last statement by Christ. And that superiority is used by Christ to also emphasize the greatness of the blessings of being in the kingdom of heaven. So regarding the superiority of John, we have two thoughts here. First, we have the superiority of the prophet and secondly, the superiority of the privileged.

First, the *superiority of the prophet*. Christ’s question “what went ye out for to see? A prophet?” implies that John was no ordinary prophet and was greater than a prophet.

John was *no ordinary prophet*. While some may have thought John a fickle reed, and others would falsely accuse him of wanting to live luxuriously through becoming famous, a great multitude of people did call him a prophet. Christ accepted their idea that John was a prophet, for indeed he was, but Christ adds to this view of John by showing that John was not just an ordinary prophet. He said, “There is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” ([Luke 7:28](#)). That is a tremendous statement when one considers all the great prophets which went before John including Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. This statement of Christ is no discrediting of these other prophets, but it emphasizes the great dedicated performance of service by John the Baptist which ought to challenge us all to serve better.

John was *greater than a prophet*. Christ would elaborate on John’s greatness in position of service by saying that John was also “much more than a prophet” ([Luke 7:26](#)). Christ quoted from [Malachi 3:1](#) to say that John was the “messenger,” that is, the forerunner of the Messiah. “This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee” ([Luke 7:27](#)). In his calling of being the forerunner of Christ, John was indeed “much more than a prophet.” This calling set John above all the other prophets. “They [the other prophets] all did virtuously, but John excelled them all; they saw Christ’s day at a distance, and their vision was yet for a great while to come; but John saw the day dawn, he saw the sun rise, and told the people of the Messiah, as one that stood among them. They spake of Christ, but he pointed to him; they said, A virgin shall conceive: he said, Behold the Lamb of God . . . That which advanced John above the Old Testament prophets was that he went immediately before Christ” (Matthew Henry). In application, we can justifiably say that nearness to Jesus Christ is that which advances anyone where it counts the most.

Second, the *superiority of the privileged*. Christ uses the superiority of John the Baptist to emphasize the greatness of the blessing of the kingdom of heaven. “He that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” This, of course, refers not to character or performance but to position and privilege. “We must take the word ‘greater’ as signifying more privileged; it will not bear any other meaning” (W. Clarkson).

How are those in the kingdom greater than John the Baptist? Or, to put it in plainer terms, how are we in our dispensation of grace greater than John the Baptist? Primarily we are greater in the privilege of having so much more Divine revelation than John the Baptist did. We can know much more spiritual truth than John could. We have the whole Scripture today. We have a far greater revelation of Jesus Christ in our hands than John possessed. The lowest saint can put his hands on the Bible and know more of Christ than did the great prophet John the Baptist. The dwarf on the mountain can see more than the giant in the valley. As the lowly student in grade school today can learn and know much more about great subjects than such great sages as Socrates or Confucius, so the humble saint today knows more than the great John the Baptist did in his day concerning Jesus Christ and the wonderful truths of the Gospel, the resurrection, the second coming, the glories of heaven,

etc. It is this principle Jesus referred to when He said, “Many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them” ([Luke 10:24](#)). “The least in the Kingdom of heaven is privileged to see and hear the things which prophets and kings longed and waited for in vain. The least in the higher dispensation may know and understand more than the loftiest souls of the dispensations that have preceded” (F. B. Meyer)

What privileges we saints possess today. Our spiritual opportunities and advantages so greatly exceed the saints of ages past that the lowest saint today exceeds in privileges the greatest saints of the early church. But to exceed the giants of the past in privilege only brings upon us far greater responsibility; for the greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. What have we, therefore, done with our spiritual opportunities? Have we used them to grow in the faith, to serve the Lord with excellence? Not many folk have done so. Though we have many more advantages than John the Baptist, we have done so much more poorly. John excelled with far less advantage than we had, and it greatly shames us.

B. THE CONSECRATION OF JOHN

The second bouquet for John which we want to look at was, as the first bouquet, also given by Christ. The commendation here spoke of the great consecration of John to his calling. Jesus said of John, “He was a burning and a shining light, and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light” ([John 5:35](#)). John was either dead at the time Christ made this commendation or, if not dead, then at least in prison; for the past tense “was” indicates that his public ministry was over. From this bouquet we will consider the character of John’s consecration and the contemplation of John’s consecration.

1. The Character of John’s Consecration

Christ summed up the excellent character of John’s consecration to his calling with the “burning and a shining light” statement. Before we look into the details of that great statement about John’s service, we need to note here the meaning of the word “light” which refers to John the Baptist. The word “light” is better translated “lamp,” for that is what it means. The word is translated from the Greek word which means “a hand-lamp” (Vincent). This meaning is important to note, for at the beginning of the Gospel of John we read that Christ is the “Light” ([John 1:4,5,7,9](#)), but John “was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light” ([John 1:8](#)). The word translated “Light” which refers to Christ is from a Greek word from which we get our English word “phosphorous.” The difference between light and lamp is that the light shines by its own inherent ability; whereas a lamp shines by the energy of another. “The Baptist did not, like Jesus, shine by his own light” (Vincent). Christ—The Light—was the light which “lighteth every man” ([John 1:9](#)). John was one who was given light by Jesus Christ. He was therefore a lamp, not The Light.

Now in regards to the details of the burning and shining light description of John’s consecration, we note in the statement the completeness of John’s service, the costliness of

John's service, and the courageousness of John's service.

The completeness of John's service. Christ described John both as "a burning and a shining light" in his service. That is a rare but much needed combination. It is both fire and facts, conflagration and illumination, passion and persuasion, inspiration and intelligence. It is like the "grace and truth" combination of [John 1:14](#) and the "honor and majesty" and "strength and beauty" combination of [Psalm 96:6](#). We seem to be either one or the other. It is rare to be both. It is rare to possess both compassionate grace and still be dogmatically true, to be honored by men but still behave with dignity (majesty), to be strong and still beautiful. We either have great zeal (burning) but little knowledge (shining), or we have much knowledge but little zeal. We need to have both burning and shining, however, if our ministry is to be complete. We will only be partial if we have one or the other but not both.

The costliness of John's service. It cost John to serve the Lord and "burning" illustrated that fact well. You do not shine unless you burn, and you do not burn without paying a price. You must give something to burn. When a candle burns, it gives of itself; when a wick burns, it gives of itself. "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up" ([John 2:17](#)) is the language of burning. For John to burn with passion for the Savior, he had to give up his head.

Christians are not very ready to do much burning for the cause of Christ today. Sacrifice is a foreign word. Service is performed if nothing else is on the schedule and if it does not require that we give up any pursuit of pleasure. Some saints, think they are "burning" up with sacrifice when they tithe. But for most people, a tithe isn't even a smoldering, let alone a burning. The nine-tenths they have left after tithing is so much that the tithe does not constitute any kind of sacrifice at all. The idea that a tithe fulfills our "burning" obligation to the Lord is not taught in either the Old Testament or New Testament. But many legalistic tightwads, who do not like the "burning" aspect of service, insist that to tithe is all that is necessary. However, when the Old Testament speaks of robbing God, it says, "Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes *and offerings*" ([Malachi 3:8](#)), not just tithes. When the New Testament speaks of exemplary "burning" giving, it speaks of "How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality" ([2 Corinthians 8:2](#)); and it exhorts us that "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully" ([2 Corinthians 9:6](#)); and it illustrates as an example of giving the poor widow who "cast in all that she had, even all her living" ([Mark 12:44](#)) which is hardly a tithe but more in the language of "burning" up for God.

The "burning" truth is also emphasized in another incident by Christ when He said, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it" ([Mark 8:35](#)). If you save the candle and never burn it, there will be no service, no life. One must give of himself if he is to burn. The martyrs of the faith made a bright light that caused the Gospel to really penetrate the darkness, for they

were willing to be literally on fire for Christ when they were burned at the stake. In contrast, twentieth century Christians in the ease and luxury of American lifestyle know precious little about burning.

The courageousness of John's service. "Shining" will take courage, and John had that courage, for his light was never hid "under a bushel" ([Matthew 5:15](#)) for shame or fear of what men might do to him. John was ever shining for Christ no matter where he was. To shine a bright light in the darkness will often bring a great protest from those in the darkness. Dens of iniquity, such as bars, dance halls, and the like do not waste money on electric bills; for they prefer the darkness. Turning on bright lights in these places would not be met with a charitable response obviously. All of this is symbolic of how spiritual darkness opposes spiritual light. The world will try hard to get us to dim our spiritual light and even to put it out completely. But we must shine faithfully anyway as did John. He shone in the wilderness, he shone in the palace, he shone in prison, he shone in popularity, and he shone even when forsaken. That it is not easy to shine in truth and righteousness is underscored by the fact that Christ had to exhort us to "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, which is in heaven" ([Matthew 5:16](#)).

2. The Contemplation of John's Consecration

After Christ described the great consecration of John in his service for God, Christ indicted the crowd for their poor contemplation of this great consecrated ministry. He said to the crowd, "Ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light" ([John 5:35](#)). John gave the multitude a superb ministry. They could have profited greatly from the burning and shining work of John the Baptist, but they did not. They demonstrated disinterest and disrespect for John's great consecrated ministry. This is seen in the word "season" and the word "rejoice."

Disinterest. The disinterest of the people to the ministry of John is found in the fact that they took in the ministry of John only for a "season." That is, they did not listen very long; they did not continue on with John. They were not all that interested in what John had to say. They listened for a little while, but their spiritual interest span was very short.

A "season" is about all you can ever interest most folk in spiritual matters. The season is generally a very short one, too. And in our day, it seems to be getting even shorter. As an example, the preaching season generally is suppose to end at least by twelve noon on Sunday; and if the preacher does not stop by twelve noon, the parishioners turn into game wardens and go after the man who dares preach out of season. But the Apostle Paul told Timothy that he was to "Preach the word, be instant [diligent] in season, out of season" ([2 Timothy 4:2](#)) which means preaching may have to go beyond twelve noon.

People want short seasons spiritually, but they delight in long seasons in fleshly pleasures. They will spend hours at sporting events (and if a game goes into overtime, they rejoice and feel they really got their money's worth), but they will only spend minutes in spiritual things. Sporting seasons are being extended so that we play basketball into the summer,

baseball into late fall, football way into the winter, and hockey from summer to summer; but spiritual seasons are being shortened more and more. It is a sad commentary on the spiritual condition of our society.

Disrespect. The disrespect of John's ministry comes from the meaning of the word "rejoice." Vincent says the word "signifies . . . The interest in the Baptist was a frivolous, superficial, and short-lived excitement." F. B. Meyer says, "The Greek word rendered rejoice has in it the idea of moths playing around a candle, or of children dancing around a torch-light, as it burns lower and lower. It is as though a light were given to men for an hour, for them to use for some high and sacred purpose; but they employ it for dancing and card-playing, instead of girding up their loins to serious tasks . . . [they] treated his ministry as a pastime."

So many today do the same. They treat spiritual things as a lark. They get serious about everything except about the things which have to do with the soul of man and his eternal destiny. They do little more than "play" church. A great man of God can preach before them, but they take it in only as entertainment, not as anything to take to heart. They listen as did Ezekiel's crowd: "Lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they do them not" ([Ezekiel 33:32](#)). It is a subtle disrespect of that which is holy.

Disinterest in and dishonor of such great consecrated service to the Lord as that of John the Baptist will not be dismissed lightly by God. Men will have to answer to God regarding what they have done with a burning and shining light ministry. God does not send a burning and shining light into our midst to be given only momentary interest and little honor. He sends such a ministry to us as a great gift of mercy for our own spiritual blessing. Wise men will give diligent attention and great honor to such a ministry. They will be good stewards of God's choicest blessings.

If you are now sitting under a burning and shining light ministry, thank God profusely for it and give it all the attention and honor you can. If you do not, the day will come when you will loath your "season" and "rejoice" attitude; for God will judge all such disinterest and dishonor.

C. THE CONFIRMATION OF JOHN

The third bouquet which we will look at is one which was given John by the people at large. This bouquet was given at a time when people were leaving John the Baptist and flocking to see Jesus Christ. They said, "John did no miracle; but all things that John spake of this man [Jesus Christ] were true" ([John 10:41](#)). This bouquet was a great confirmation of the integrity of the ministry of John the Baptist.

In our study of this bouquet, we will note the miracle evaluation and the message evaluation.

1. The Miracle Evaluation

There is a latent negative comment in this bouquet, but it is like thorns on the rose stem. The thorns may be there, but the rose on the top makes up for it. The negative comment about John doing no miracle does not take away from the “rose” comment of the message.

The fact that John did no miracle downgraded him as far as the crowd was concerned. This is not surprising, for the crowd is always looking for the sensational and the spectacular. If the preacher only has a message, the crowd will be disappointed. They want something more interesting to the flesh—and miracles are required to satisfy that interest.

How often we despise things unless they are unusual, extra-ordinary, and special. Some of the best things of life are often despised because of that. We do not observe the beauty of the sky unless there is an eclipse. We do not look at the stars unless there is a space ship up there. The news media writes mostly about the odd, strange, curious, spectacular, and unusual. But we ought not to despise the ordinary—it is really what we need and what counts the most. As an example, for years the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine was adorned with the art work of Norman Rockwell. The covers were prize works of art. What was the art all about? Just ordinary life. Every picture that Rockwell painted was generally about a mundane happening in life; and, as such, he reminded us that it is the ordinary which is really the important. The Family Circus cartoon does the same. It is just about the ordinary events of a household. But that is what makes it a favorite of the readers. This cartoon along with Norman Rockwell’s pictures did not despise the ordinary and thus shows us the ordinary is indeed important and has great value.

This business of evaluating things on the basis of miracles has gotten into the church. People think things are pretty dull and that we are not doing anything unless we have special meetings or something new and unusual on the schedule. Many get interested in church only when something “special” is planned on the program. But such an attitude is no different than the attitude that demands signs, and Jesus denounced that attitude with considerable firmness. He said, “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign” ([Matthew 12:39](#)). The word “sign” here is the same word as the word translated miracle in the [John 10:41](#) text.

Elijah learned it was not the spectacular that was so important but it was the “still small voice” ([1 Kings 19:12,13](#)). We must not judge a ministry on miracles but rather on the message. False apostles can do well in the miracle business with their sleight of hand and clever deceptions (cp. [2 Corinthians 11:13,14](#)). But they cannot do well in the message department. It takes a true ministry to do well in the message area. And it is the message that is important. We can get along without the miracles but never without the message.

2. The Message Evaluation

One of the finest things said of John the Baptist was the statement spoken here by the crowd: “all things that John spake of this man were true” ([John 10:41](#)). That verse often comes on us rather quickly in reading through the Scripture; and as a result, we generally miss the import of that statement. But ponder it patiently. It would be hard to pay a higher

compliment than what is said of John in that statement. It is a testimony of the great character of John the Baptist that he spoke with impeccable integrity about Jesus Christ.

To speak honestly of Jesus Christ is not the usual among ministers in any age. The vast majority of ordained ministers in our country do not speak the truth about Christ. Many of them deny the Deity of Christ; many deny His sinlessness; many deny His virgin birth and insist, as did Christ's contemporary critics, that he was born of "fornication" ([John 8:41](#)). Many deny the vicarious nature of His death on Calvary. Many deny His resurrection, His second coming, His earthly reign, and other great truths about Him. Hence, many do not speak the truth about Jesus Christ. John did, however, and it is a great testimony of the excellency of his ministry.

A minister may not do miracles today—that is, in present day terminology, he may not build super large churches, have great crowds, lead his denomination or group in baptisms, and establish schools or other organizations, or have a world-wide ministry through radio or television—but if he speaks nothing but the truth about Jesus Christ, that minister is a good one. For there are many ministers who do all the other things—build large churches, have great crowds, lead their denomination or group in baptisms, establish famous and large organizations, and have a world-wide ministry—whose message of Jesus Christ lacks integrity.

We need in our day to get back to the great importance of speaking the truth about Jesus Christ rather than emphasizing all the other things we are emphasizing in our churches. The integrity of our message about Christ is of absolute, utmost importance. If we lack integrity in speaking about Christ, we might as well turn in our ordination papers and get out of the ministry; for we are an imposter, and our message is a poisonous message that will curse man rather than bless man. The world needs to hear about Jesus Christ—in truth and only in the truth.

Of course, it is hard to speak the truth about Christ; for you can be persecuted for doing that; you can pay the martyr's price for doing that. On the other hand, you can speak falsely about Christ and do right well in this world. Therefore, it takes a man of real spiritual character and dedication to speak the truth about Christ. John the Baptist was such a man. He performed no miracles—but that did not matter. What mattered was that he spoke the truth at all times about Jesus Christ. And that is a great, great compliment of his ministry.

D. THE CONFUSION ABOUT JOHN

The fourth and final bouquet which we will examine is composed of some indirect commendations given John when the people confused him with Christ. We will note the incidences in which the confusion occurred and the instructions this confusion gives us.

1. The Incidences of the Confused Identity

We will look at three incidences in Scripture in which John was either thought to be Christ or Christ was thought to be John. The three incidences are the reasoning of the

people, the report of the disciples, and the response of Herod.

The reasoning of the people. The first identity confusion occurred at the beginning of John's ministry. When he came on the scene, many thought he was Christ, the promised Messiah. "The people were in expectation, [at the time when John began his public ministry], and all men mused [the word means to reason] in their hearts of [concerning] John, whether he were the Christ, or not" ([Luke 3:15](#)). Folk had good reason to suspect John may have been the coming Messiah. After all, it had been four centuries since anything supernatural had come on the scene. Furthermore, the stories would get around about the vision Zacharias had in the Temple about John and that Elizabeth bore him when she was long past age to give birth. The unusual features about the story of John the Baptist and his obvious spirit-inspired ministry would cause people to think that he might indeed be the Messiah. But, of course, this reasoning could have been corrected if they had paid attention to the details and to John's message. All reasoning in the spiritual realm will be faulty when the Divinely revealed truths are not duly considered.

The report of the disciples. Sometime after Christ had begun His ministry, He asked His disciples, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man, am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elias [Elijah]; and others, Jeremias [Jeremiah], or one of the prophets" ([Matthew 16:13,14](#)). When Christ came on the scene, folk did not do well in recognizing Who He was. They should have done better, for John the Baptist had done a superb job of announcing the forerunner and pointing Him out to people. But as is generally the case in spiritual matters, unless the Spirit of God illuminates the mind of man, man cannot discern the great things of God. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" ([1 Corinthians 2:14](#)). The Spirit of God will not illuminate a rebellious heart; and many of Christ's listeners belonged in that category; therefore, they remained in the dark regarding who Jesus Christ was.

There were a number of different opinions of whom Christ was. Many thought he was one of the Old Testament prophets who was resurrected. But some thought he was John the Baptist; and because this was the first person mentioned by the disciples regarding who others thought Christ was, it probably indicated that Christ was more commonly thought to be John the Baptist than He was thought to be anyone else.

The response of Herod. The most traumatic confusion of John's identity was made by Herod Antipus, the ruler who ordered the beheading of John. When "king Herod heard of him [Christ], (for his name was spread abroad) . . . he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him. Others said, It is Elias [Elijah]. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded; he is raised from the dead" ([Mark 6:14-16](#)). We looked at this text in our last chapter when noting some of

the punishment Herod experienced for beheading John. Here we note it as one of those incidences where the identity of John the Baptist was confused with that of Jesus Christ. Herod would not listen to what others said. He was adamant that Christ was John the Baptist. He was haunted by the grisly deed of John's beheading and could only think of Christ as being John the Baptist risen from the dead. Unrepented sin will always impair the spiritual discernment of man.

2. The Instructions From the Confused Identity

It was a great compliment for John to be confused with Christ. Whether folk thought he was Christ or whether they thought Christ was John, the confusion paid a high compliment to John. For to be confused with Christ, one will have to live a Christ-like life. John the Baptist did indeed live such a life, and it is a great way to end this book on John the Baptist by emphasizing this fact. His life was as noble a life as any human ever lived. To be confused with Christ says it all.

When we look at this fact of John being frequently confused with Christ, it should cause us to ponder if men have ever compared us favorably to Jesus Christ. A few times we have heard people describe some godly man as one who reminded them of Christ or who lived much like Christ. But such a compliment is seldom heard and for good reason—few men live like Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul said, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” ([Philippians 2:5](#)) and then gives us a tremendous paragraph on the attitude and actions of Jesus Christ. After reading that, we can understand why few of us will ever be compared to Jesus Christ, let alone be confused as Christ.

But though we fall far short of being like Him now, one day all the redeemed will indeed be like Jesus Christ. It is one of the great promises in Scripture: “We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” ([1 John 3:2](#)). One of the blessed results of salvation is this eventual and wonderful transformation from our old selves to become like Christ. “He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” ([Philippians 1:6](#)).

Sometimes evangelists and pastors, to make for an interesting message, attempt to describe what they think we will be like in heaven. We have heard speakers go so far as to say how tall we will be etc. Such unscriptural speculation often borders on the ridiculous. But it appeals to the carnal mind. The Bible, however, tells us one mighty important thing about what we will be like in heaven—we will be like Him! To anyone who is sick of sin and tired of his old nature and longing to live right for the glory of God, that message will thrill his heart. And it will inspire him to try harder to live more like Christ. Oh, that we might be so dedicated to living like our Lord that folk would see Jesus in us even as they saw Christ in John the Baptist. Let the identity confusion of John the Baptist inspire us to live more like our Savior.

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JOHN THE BAPTIST BOOK

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1. The Proclamation After the Baptism

1. BEHOLD

A. THE WITNESS OF CHRIST

A. The Meaning of This Witnessing

A. The Mission of This Witnessing

A. THE WORK OF CHRIST

1. His Work and the Spirit of God

1. His Work and the Judgment of God

1. His Work and the Lamb of God

A. THE WORSHIP OF CHRIST

1. His Doctrine of Christ

1. His Devotion to Christ

1. His Deference to Christ

1. BELIEVERS

A. THE LOWLINESS OF HIS FOLLOWERS

A. The Expectation of This Composition

A. The Explanation for This Composition

1. The Exhortation from This Composition

A. THE LEARNING OF HIS FOLLOWERS

1. Supplication

1. Self-denial

1. Salvation

1. BELLIGERENTS

A. THE INDICTMENT OF THE BELLIGERENTS

A. They Rejected the Counsel of God

A. They Refused the Baptism of John

A. THE INTERROGATION BY THE BELLIGERENTS

1. The Questions

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A. THE INDECISION IN THE BELLIGERENTS

1. The Unbelief in Their Indecision

1. The Cowardliness in Their Indecision

1. The Incompetency in Their Indecision

1. BOUND

A. THE DETAINING OF JOHN

A. The Prompting of the Imprisonment

A. The Place of the Imprisonment

1. The Perspective of the Imprisonment

1. The Penalty for the Imprisonment

A. THE DOUBTING BY JOHN

1. The Reasons for the Doubting

1. The Remedy for the Doubting

1. The Remonstrations for the Doubting

1. BEHEADED

A. THE PROVOKER OF THE BEHEADING

A. The Defilement of the Practice

A. The Destructiveness of the Practice

1. The Denouncing of the Practice

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A. THE PARTICULARS OF THE BEHEADING

1. The Occasion for the Beheading

1. The Ordering of the Beheading

A. THE POSTLUDE OF THE BEHEADING

1. The Pallbearers of John

1. The Parting of Jesus

1. The Punishment of Herod

1. BOUQUETS

A. THE CONTRASTS IN JOHN

A. The Character of Christ's Comments

A. The Character of John's Conduct

A. THE CONSECRATION OF JOHN

1. The Character of John's Consecration

1. The Contemplation of John's Consecration

A. THE CONFIRMATION OF JOHN

1. The Miracle Evaluation

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A. THE CONFUSION ABOUT JOHN

1. The Incidences of the Confused Identity

1. The Instructions From the Confused Identity

