

# JOHN THE BAPTIZER

## Why Did Jesus Call Him Great?

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**P**rovocative. Outrageous. Nonconformist. John didn't get high marks from many of the social and religious leaders of his day. Yet Jesus referred to him as a model of greatness. Why?

And what can we learn from someone whose life was shaped not only by the barrenness of the Judean wilderness but also by his role as the forerunner of the Messiah?

In the following pages, Bill Crowder, RBC Director of Church Ministries, helps us find the timeless significance of this "voice crying in the wilderness." Now, as much as in the past, significance is found not by following the crowd but by hearing the call to a new kind of greatness.

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# A PORTRAIT OF GREATNESS

The word *great* has been attached to a wide range of persons, events, and conditions.

- ***In history.*** Alexander the Great was a Greek general who had conquered the world by his 33rd birthday.
- ***In nature.*** The Great Lakes are in the upper midwest of the United States, and the Great Barrier Reef is off the coast of Australia.
- ***In architecture.*** We have the Great Wall of China and the Great Pyramids.
- ***In film.*** One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Great Escape*, which chronicles the massive escape by allied soldiers from a Nazi prisoner of war camp during World War II.
- ***In economics.*** Few events could rival the

Great Depression of the 1930s—an event that shaped the values of a generation.

- ***In literature.***

Shakespeare said, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them” (*Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene V).

If you type the word *great* into Google, the Internet search engine, you are likely to come up with close to 3 billion occurrences. That’s 3 billion more examples than any of us are interested in. Yet, as common as the word is, there is one place that the word *great* deserves our careful attention.

## A HIGHER STANDARD

The Bible uses *greatness* in the ultimate sense. In one of hundreds of occurrences, a Jewish song declares, “The

Lord is the great God,  
and the great King above  
all gods” (Ps. 95:3).

Further, in the Bible  
we are called to respond  
to the great commission  
(Mt. 28:19-20), are  
compelled to love by the  
great commandment (Mt.  
22:36-38), and are warned  
of the judgment of the great  
tribulation (Mt. 24:21).

Even though these  
examples rise to a higher  
level of importance, they are  
similar to the way *great* is  
used outside the pages of  
the Bible. There are other  
places, however, where  
the Bible uses the word  
differently. Jesus used the  
word *great* in a way that  
seems to turn the idea  
upside down. Referring  
to a world that is looking  
for natural superiority of  
one person over another,  
He said to His disciples:

*Yet it shall not be so  
among you; but whoever  
desires to become great*

*among you shall be your  
servant. And whoever of  
you desires to be first shall  
be slave of all. For even  
the Son of Man did not  
come to be served, but  
to serve, and to give His  
life a ransom for many  
(Mk. 10:43-45).*

The greatness Jesus was  
referring to runs contrary to  
our natural inclinations. It  
isn't based on power, fame,  
or wealth. On another  
occasion, He took an  
opportunity to give us an  
example of the kind of  
person He had in mind.

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**—Shakespeare**

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## A SURPRISING DECLARATION

With all the people of the Bible to choose from, Jesus selected one person to model for us a different kind of greatness—a misunderstood greatness. His name? John the Baptizer. Of him, the Lord declared:

*I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he (Lk. 7:28).*

There is mystery in those words. Who was this John, and what made him so great in the eyes of the Savior? And how does that greatness compare to the “least in the kingdom of God”? These are questions worthy of our attention as we examine the life of the man Jesus called great.

## A GREAT EXPECTATION

When I think of great expectations, I think of Joseph Kennedy, Jr. Joe was just a boy when his father dreamed that he would become president of the United States. He was groomed, prepared, and equipped to eventually carry the Kennedy name to the White House. But Joe, a navy pilot, was killed during a World War II military operation, and the mantle of political expectations fell to Joe’s younger brother, Jack, who would eventually become the 35th president of the United States.

Imagine, though, what young Joe must have felt growing up with the pressure to one day become president. That’s not a target you can just get close to. There are no near misses. You either hit it in the bull’s-

eye or miss it altogether.

Very few of us face the kind of expectations that were placed on young Joe. But the ones for John the Baptizer were far greater. He was born with the expectation of preparing the way for the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah.

## **THE WORDS OF A PROPHET**

These expectations began in the Old Testament. Malachi, the writer of the final book of the Old Testament, declared:

*“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts (3:1).*

In the earliest portions of

the Old Testament, God had promised a Deliverer who would come and rescue humanity from the sin that entered the world in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-19). Now, in the closing book of the Old Testament, we are given an important piece of information about that Deliverer: He would be preceded by a messenger, a forerunner. Malachi actually spoke of two messengers:

- “My messenger”—the forerunner who would come to prepare the way.
- “The Messenger of the covenant”—defined by Malachi as “the Lord, whom you seek.”

The Messenger of the covenant is Christ Himself, and the forerunner who would prepare the way for Him would be John the Baptizer. Interestingly, Malachi’s prophecy of the forerunner is quoted in all four New Testament gospel records, and it introduces

John's ministry to us:

*As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.'" John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mk. 1:2-4).*

Mark quoted from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to paint a picture of the promised forerunner, a role fulfilled by John. Imagine what it would be like to grow up with the realization that your life had been set aside for this extraordinary responsibility. John would prepare the way and proclaim the arrival of the Son of God in His mission to redeem a lost world—great expectations indeed.

## **THE ROLE OF A FORERUNNER**

What did it mean to be a forerunner? What would he actually do? In Mark's introduction of John the Baptizer (Mk. 1:2-4), he gives several significant tasks that John would be entrusted with as the forerunner of Christ.

- Prepare the Messiah's way by announcing His arrival onto the world scene.
- Cry out in the wilderness as a living parable of commitment to Christ.
- Call people to be prepared for Messiah's coming by introducing the key elements of the message Christ Himself would deliver. That message included a declaration of the King's kingdom, the danger of the sin that separated people from their rightful King, and the hope of forgiveness to those who

would turn to the King in repentance.

This was a strong challenge, and a serious message. In the same way that a herald announced

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***It was John's role not only to prepare the way of the King but also to prepare the people who would be the recipients of the King's message.***

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the arrival of a king, the forerunner would announce the coming of the King of kings. But it was more than just an announcement. His preparation would include a call to action that challenged the people of first-century Israel to look inward and to look Godward. They were to look inward and recognize

their failings, and they were to look Godward for the remedy for those failings.

As such, it was John's role not only to prepare the way of the King but also to prepare the people who would be the recipients of the King's message. It was a massive task. Bible teacher Herbert Lockyer wrote:

We seem to see [John's] rugged figure standing with arms outstretched, as with one hand he takes the Old Testament and with the other holds the New, and who, through his ministry, makes the transition from Law to Grace. He was the foreclosure of the old and the forerunner of the new (*All The Men Of The Bible*, p.195).

The prophecies of the forerunner of Christ would find their fulfillment in the solitary cry of a man marked by God for that role. And

even the way John would enter the world would demonstrate the special call God had upon his life.

## A GREAT BEGINNING

I love the start of a new baseball season. Every team starts fresh. Every team and player has a blank sheet that they will fill with numbers, achievements, wins and losses over the course of the next 162 games. It's a new beginning, full of promise and hope.

Beginnings are like that. They carry with them a deep sense of opportunity. When I was a pastor, I saw it whenever I visited a hospital maternity ward to join in the joy and celebration of the safe delivery of a new baby. Compressed within that newborn's tiny frame was unbelievable potential and opportunity to make a difference in this world.

This was particularly true with the birth of John the Baptizer.

## AN EXPECTANT FAMILY

Interestingly, the gospel of Luke doesn't open with the birth of Jesus Christ but with the birth of His forerunner, John. Let's look at the story in chapter 1:

*There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years (Lk. 1:5-7).*

Here we are introduced

to John's parents and given helpful information. We learn that:

- They were of priestly heritage (v.5), with Zacharias (the father) serving as a priest, while Elizabeth (the mother) could trace her family line all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel.
- They were godly people who had sought to live in obedience to God's laws—so much so that Luke describes them as “blameless.”
- They were childless and “well advanced in years.” This was a significant issue in a culture that placed a high value on having children.

Their childlessness was a heartache that Zacharias and Elizabeth had come to accept over the course of their lives. And, based on Luke's description of their

character, it's to their credit that their disappointment in being childless did not impact their love for God or their service for Him. Even in their emptiness, they remained faithful to God—and that faithfulness would be rewarded.

As Zacharias was performing his priestly duties in the temple, an angel brought him a message that was, quite frankly, beyond belief. Having never encountered an angelic being, this faithful priest was understandably rattled by the sight (v.12). The angel, however, had amazing news to report to Zacharias:

*Do not be afraid,  
Zacharias, for your prayer  
is heard; and your wife  
Elizabeth will bear you a  
son, and you shall call his  
name John. And you will  
have joy and gladness,  
and many will rejoice at  
his birth. For he will be*

*great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children," and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (vv.13-17).*

Okay, be honest. How would you respond if you and your spouse were old and long past the point of being able to have children? Zacharias' disappointment must have caused him to be extremely distressed by the angel's words. Not only was it not very funny, it wasn't very believable to this aged priest. So Zacharias

responded accordingly:

*How shall I know this?  
For I am an old man, and  
my wife is well advanced  
in years (v.18).*

Whether Zacharias' words were fueled by the pain of years of childlessness or rooted in an honest assessment of his situation, his doubt was quickly confronted by the angel:

*The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time" (vv.19-20).*

Because of his doubt, Zacharias would be mute until the birth of this promised, long-hoped-for

son. When he left the temple, the people waiting outside for him thought that he had experienced some kind of a vision because he was in the temple for so long and because he couldn't speak (vv.21-22). But the angel was real and his promise soon came to pass. Elizabeth, Zacharias' aged wife, became pregnant (vv.24-25). And the child she carried would be the promised forerunner of Messiah.

## **AN EXTENDED FAMILY**

After Luke told the story of Zacharias and Elizabeth, he brought Mary, the mother of Jesus, onto the stage of this drama. And the events we encounter become a powerful foreshadowing of John's role as forerunner—even before he is born!

Mary received her own message of miraculous childbirth from the angel

Gabriel (vv.26-27) and considered the magnitude of having been chosen by God to bring His Son into the world (v.38). She obediently accepted this amazing declaration and submitted to God's purposes.

During this time of wonder and obedience, Mary left Nazareth and went to visit her dear relative Elizabeth, who was in her sixth month of pregnancy. These two humble, godly women were both the recipients of miraculous pregnancies, and both were anticipating the arrival of very special children—one the son of a priest, the other the Son of the Most High.

When the women saw each other, the yet unborn forerunner of Messiah leaped in his mother's womb (v.41). Elizabeth instantly understood. No doubt Zacharias had conveyed to her (in writing) the message

of the angel Gabriel that their son would be the Messiah's forerunner. Elizabeth immediately interpreted the reaction of the child in her womb as an indication that it was Mary who was bearing the Christ-child. Elizabeth's praise to God for the coming Messiah (vv.42-45) prompted Mary's great "magnificat" of worship (vv.46-55). The stage was set for two births of two sons who would rock their times and change the world—forever.

## **AN EXCITING ANNOUNCEMENT**

The time finally came for Elizabeth to deliver her child. Zacharias had been incapable of speech for 9 months and had to rejoice in silence during the first days of the baby's life (vv.57-58). But on the eighth day, everything changed.

*So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John" (vv.59-60).*

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***The stage was set for two births of two sons who would rock their times and change the world—forever.***

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When questioned by his relatives about the boy's name, Zacharias affirmed, in writing, that his son's name was John (v.63), in obedience to the angelic command (v.13). Immediately, speech was restored to the elderly priest, and he declared the mission

God had given to his new son (vv.67-79)—a mission that would prepare the way for Messiah (v.76), prepare the way for salvation (v.77), and declare the mercy of God to a people desperately in need of mercy (v.78). The next 30-plus years of John's life would be spent in preparation for the fulfillment of his God-given assignment as Christ's forerunner:

*So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel (v.80).*

Quite an entrance into the world, wouldn't you agree? Yet, this great beginning was *only* the beginning. The impact John would have in his service for the Savior would build on the foundation of this great beginning. Old Testament prophets had laid the groundwork. A miraculous

birth had brought those prophetic words into historical reality. A godly home would plant the seeds of truth into his young heart. And the forerunner would step forth with a dynamic life to prepare the way of the Lord.

## A GREAT FOCUS

**W**hen I was a student in Bible college, I played intercollegiate soccer. I was the goalkeeper, and, as such, I had one job: To stop the ball from going into the goal. Simple, right? Well, not really.

In soccer, the goalies are the only players with the game in front of them all the time. In spite of that, with player movement, defensive sets, and lightning-fast action, the events before you can quickly blur together in a sea of motion. At that moment, the goalie

is vulnerable. In a sense, the positioning of defensive players and the strategy of the offensive players becomes secondary. The only thing that matters is the ball. If your ability to focus on the ball is impaired by the action of the game, being scored on is inevitable.

Ultimately, there is only one thing that the goalie must focus on: the ball.

This is true in life as well. John the Baptizer could easily have gotten distracted and lost sight of the real focus of his life, but he didn't. He maintained his focus. This resulted in a clear sense of purpose that evidenced itself in two critical ways.

## **BOLDNESS IN MESSAGE**

John is presented in the pages of Scripture as being fearless. He attacked with full force the mission that was entrusted to him,

undeterred by either hardship or opposition. In fact, hardship and opposition seemed to strengthen his determination rather than diminish it. This boldness is seen in at least three areas of his ministry:

**Boldness To Confront Empty Religion.** "When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance'" (Mt. 3:7-8).

**Boldness In Announcing Messiah's Arrival.** "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.' John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk. 1:3-4).

## **Boldness In Pointing People To God.**

Jesus said of John, “He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light” (Jn. 5:35).

Even though it would have been a lot easier to blend in and not to stand out as odd or different, John maintained his boldness and kept his focus. The courage to stand alone and speak the truth is a tremendous thing—and one that John embodied in his service for Christ.

## **PRIORITIES IN MINISTRY**

In addition to his boldness in message, John’s focus was exhibited in his clear sense of priority.

**Simplicity Of Lifestyle.** John was not distracted by many of the things that can get in the way of our own service. His home was the desert. His

clothing? Well, it wasn’t exactly Armani or Prada. He wore a self-made garment fashioned from camel’s hair. His diet was not something that you would see recommended on a televised cooking show, unless there are some new and exciting recipes with locusts and wild honey (Mt. 3:4).

Admittedly, a lifestyle like John’s is not a requirement for all followers of Christ, or even for all spiritual servants. John had been placed at birth under a Nazirite vow (Lk. 1:15), like Samson of the Old Testament. It was a vow to live a life of absolute purity and devotion to the Lord (Num. 6:13-21), which actually made a person something of a spectacle in appearance. We’re not all called to that kind of lifestyle.

The principle this simplicity describes, however, should have an influence on our thinking. The simplicity

of John's lifestyle allowed him to focus on his mission, and that's something we can learn from. The apostle Paul, writing to a young pastor, said:

*You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier (2 Tim. 2:3-4).*

That's a key passage. Service can be derailed by the distractions that upset our ability to focus. John's simple lifestyle removed many of those distractions.

### **Integrity Of Heart.**

John's character was so shaped by spiritual focus that even his enemies had to acknowledge the purity of his life. Mark 6:20 reads:

*Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when*

*he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.*

This is amazing.

It was Herod who would eventually have John executed, yet there is no doubt that John's example had a great impact on him. Notice that Herod feared John. Why? Because John "was a just and holy man."

When personal integrity is recognized by one's enemies, it speaks to the quality and consistency of that person's life. In John's case, it spoke of someone who had learned to keep his eye on the goal and to strive for spiritual authenticity.

John was able to maintain his boldness and his priorities because he kept his focus on the Christ he served.

Important as these qualities are, however, there is a potential downside. Boldness in message, if not properly

manifested, can be mistaken for arrogance. That's why we are challenged not only to declare the truth but to do so "in love" (Eph. 4:15). Truth outside the context of love can be seen as condemning and angry.

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the context of love  
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and angry.*

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Likewise, priorities in Christian service are vital. But if they are left unguarded, what begins as a genuine desire for personal holiness can deteriorate into self-righteousness.

How do we guard against these attitudes that can distort our hearts, minds, and testimonies? By keeping life in perspective—the perspective of humility.

## A GREAT HUMILITY

At the beginning of this booklet, we listed a variety of things and people that have "the Great" in their title. That list made me curious, so I went online and did a Google search for "the humble." After looking at 50 pages of results, I didn't find a single case of a person being referred to as "So-and-so the Humble." There were plenty of "So-and-so the Greats," but no one was referred to as "the Humble." Such are the priorities of the world-system we live in. Being humble is okay, but only if it helps you to get ahead.

For John, humility was not a label to be worn or a device to be used. It was a condition of his heart that was born out of a clear understanding of who he was—and who he wasn't.

## UNDERSTANDING HIS ROLE

John wasn't confused about who he was or what he was to do. In Mark's introduction of John, we read what John said about himself:

*[John] preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk. 1:7-8).*

Notice the clear sense of purpose John described. He saw Christ as greater and Christ's mission as greater. He had no problem with playing "second fiddle" to the Messiah. John's role was that of a servant. Nothing more, nothing less. In fact, John's clarity of mind on this was so thorough that he saw himself as "not worthy to stoop down and loose" the

sandal strap of the Son of God. There was no room in such a perspective for self-promotion, only for honest humility. And for John, this was critical.

This attitude was also displayed by John at the baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:13-15) as he publicly declared that he was unworthy to baptize Christ—an act that would launch the Savior's public work.

What a contrast to Jesus' disciples! They regularly jockeyed for position and power, seeking self-advancement and personal honor. Notice:

*Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not*

*so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves” (Lk. 22:24-26).*

What the disciples would struggle with, John had readily embraced. He understood his role, and as a result he displayed a heart of true humility. It was a genuine response of someone who saw Christ for all He is, and willingly bowed before Him in worship and service.

## **UNDERSTANDING CHRIST’S ROLE**

When John looked at Jesus, he saw the promised Messiah and made Him the focus. That’s how it should be in the realm of spiritual service. It’s not about the messenger; it’s about the message. For John, this was a mission statement. He continued to place the

spotlight on Christ, taking it intentionally off himself. John displayed this in the following passage:

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.” And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that*

*this is the Son of God.” Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, “Behold the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus (Jn. 1:29-37).*

Notice how John continually deferred to Christ. He declared:

**The Role Of Christ (v.29).** “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John affirmed that the mission of Christ was far greater than anything he or any other man could accomplish. It was a mission of rescue and redemption that deserved the attention of every human being.

**The Eternity Of Christ (v.30).** “He was before me.” Remember that John was born months ahead of Christ (Lk. 1). So this is not a statement of

chronology, but a statement about the person of Christ that transcends time.

Having existed with God the Father from eternity past (Jn. 1:1-2), Jesus was above the limitations of time.

**The Endorsement Of Christ (v.32).** “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove.” The reality of Christ was not a matter of one man’s opinion. It was, in fact, a truth that was validated by the Holy Spirit’s presence.

**The Identity Of Christ (v.34).** “This is the Son of God.” John recognized Jesus and publicly declared before anyone else had that He was, in fact, God in human flesh.

**The Priority Of Christ (vv.36-37).** When John repeated his assertion that Jesus was the “Lamb of God” (v.36), it came with a price. Those words were intentionally directed to two

of his own disciples, John the son of Zebedee and Andrew the brother of Simon Peter. Those two disciples of John immediately stopped following John, and followed Christ instead. It was right, necessary, and appropriate for them to do so. But it also revealed how committed John was to advancing

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***John was not interested in building empires or followings. His only concern was pointing men and women to the Savior.***

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Christ instead of himself. He was not interested in building empires or followings. His only

concern was pointing men and women to the Savior.

John the Baptizer's clear understanding of the role and identity of Christ made it very easy for him to be certain of his own role in the drama.

So much of the time, humility is all about perspective. John expressed the only perspective that matters when he said of Jesus Christ:

*A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, "I am not the Christ," but, "I have been sent before Him." He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy*

*of mine is fulfilled.  
He must increase,  
but I must decrease  
(Jn. 3:27-30).*

That's a true heart of humility. To acknowledge the greatness of another, to seek the advancement of another, and to focus the attention on another rather than one's self is at the heart of humility.

What strikes me so profoundly about John's character, however, is that it was completely without

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regret or resentment. It gave him a sense of gain rather than loss, prompting him to say, "Therefore this joy of

mine is fulfilled" (Jn. 3:29). He celebrated the fact that there was great joy in humbly serving Christ. The more Christ was exalted, the more John felt the joy of God in his heart. It displayed the cry of his heart that said, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

## **A GREAT DANGER**

**W**e live in a dangerous world filled with dangerous people. This reality was painfully driven home to me in 2004.

During his growing up years, our eldest son Matt made a dear and lasting friend in Jason. From youth group activities to whitewater rafting experiences to mission trips, Matt and Jason had great times together. As they

grew into adulthood, Matt joined the Army and Jason worked with his fiancée at a Christian camp as they prepared for their upcoming wedding.

In August, while Matt was stationed overseas, Jason's mom contacted me asking for prayer. Jason and Lindsay (his fiancée) were missing and their families were greatly concerned. Their disappearance was radically out of character for these responsible young adults. The families' concerns proved to be well-founded. Several days after the search had begun, their bodies were found—murdered.

When my wife and I went to see Jason's folks, his mom said to me, "Who would have thought that Matt was safer in Iraq than Jason was here at home." Yes, we live in a dangerous world indeed.

So did John the Baptizer.

He also encountered evil people in a dangerous world. For him, however, it wasn't just a general evil he faced. It was a danger that resulted from challenging wrong behavior and calling people to prepare their hearts for Messiah. This commitment to his calling exposed him to the kinds of dangers that sometimes come when we live for Christ in a troubled world.

### **DANGER #1: BEING MISUNDERSTOOD**

When John spoke, some people thought he was the Messiah because he spoke the message of God boldly and truthfully. Even though he repeatedly denied that he was the Messiah, he was still misunderstood. In fact, after his death people were still confused about who he was. When Jesus asked His disciples for the opinions of the crowds as to His own

identity, He received this reply:

*Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets (Mt. 16:14).*

Even after he was dead, John's message and mission continued to be misunderstood and misrepresented.

We too can be misunderstood. When we stand up for the things of Christ, we must do so with the realization that the world around us doesn't have a frame of reference with which to understand our commitment. Paul warned the church at Corinth:

*The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).*

We must be wise in our response to such

misunderstanding. In a sense, we should even anticipate it and give our best efforts to ensure that if misunderstanding occurs, it's not because we have failed to live rightly or communicate clearly.

## **DANGER #2: BEING LABELED A FOOL**

In our culture, commitment to Christ usually results in a raised eyebrow and some choice words. I'm convinced that when John chose to live a life of devotion instead of a life of pleasure, a life of simplicity instead of a life in the pursuit of creature comforts, he was the target of no small amount of ridicule.

This is implied in the words of Jesus. When the religious leaders criticized Him for associating with sinful people, He pointed out their previous ridicule of John:

*John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a demon" (Lk. 7:33).*

Even more than just branding John a freak, or a fool, or a fanatic, they drove the dagger deeper by accusing him of being demon-possessed because of the intensity of his commitment to God's call.

Very little has changed in the two millennia that have transpired since then. When Jim Elliot was wrestling with the opinions of those who thought him foolish to enter the field of world missions, he wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." Elliot lost his life in the jungles of Ecuador while attempting to reach people with the message of Christ. But he gained so much more in the presence of his God.

John the Baptizer lived Elliot's creed long before it

was written. He gave up the temporal so that he could impact the eternal.

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***"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."***

**—Jim Elliot**

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### **DANGER #3: DEALING WITH DOUBTS**

Doubt can be terrible. It makes us vulnerable to our worst fears and deepest disappointments. It can cause us to question everything we were once most certain about.

I believe that John began to have doubts after he was arrested and imprisoned by Herod. He had spent himself in strenuous, aggressive ministry and suddenly

been taken out of play. In prison, John experienced a new kind of isolation. This was not the isolation of life in the desert that he had previously experienced by choice. It was a separation from the people and the work he cared for so deeply. I believe it took its toll on his emotions and his confidence.

In Luke 7, some of John's disciples sent word to him about the miraculous works of Jesus. But John's reaction was not one of exclamation points. It was one of question marks. He sent his followers back to Jesus with his questions:

*John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Lk. 7:19).*

John, who had once boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God, now struggled with doubts of

Christ's identity. This reveals the power of our emotions to drive our thinking. It also reminds us of how human John really was. Far too often, we elevate biblical characters to the status of superheroes. John was human and just as subject to the danger of doubt as any of us.

#### **DANGER #4: BEING BLAMED BY OTHERS**

This danger is clearly seen in the encounters John had with Herod and his wife. In fact, Herod's new wife seemed to blame John for all the problems in her life—in spite of the fact that they were problems of her own making. This danger was not just imagined, nor was it the paranoid fantasies of a man who had been in the desert too long. In reality, it resulted in John's death.

The story is painfully familiar. Herod, a political

“king” ruling on behalf of Rome, had unlawfully married Herodias, who had been the wife of his brother Philip. John had unyieldingly confronted this public adultery until Herodias demanded that Herod have him arrested for what she considered to be personal attacks.

This resulted in conflict in Herod’s household. While he sought to protect John, his wife looked for ways to kill the prophet (Mk. 6:19-20). John held unswervingly to his convictions, and Herodias finally devised a plan to manipulate her new husband into getting rid of John once and for all. Mark recounts the events:

*Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief men of Galilee. And when Herodias’ daughter herself came in and danced, and*

*pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, “Ask me whatever you want, and I will give it to you.” He also swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom.” So she went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist!” Immediately she came in with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave*

*it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother (Mk. 6:21-28).*

Herod, whose moral failings with his brother's wife revealed his vulnerability to sexual temptation, once again succumbed to his desires. Bible teachers consistently describe this dance as inappropriate (a princess would never be expected to dance for men like a slave girl) and sensual—exploiting Herod's weakness of moral character. This weakness cost John his head.

At the same time, Herodias' willingness to use her own daughter in a diabolical plot to kill an innocent man cost her whatever shred of personal dignity and honor she had left. Unwilling to accept responsibility for her choices and their consequences, Herodias found it much more convenient to blame

John for her troubles.

It was a tragic scene that shows the very real dangers that come when people seek to live for God in the midst of a dangerous world.

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***John may have had moments when he struggled with doubt, but he stayed true to his calling—even at the cost of his life.***

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Yet, to the very end, John was true to his mission and true to his message. He may have had moments when he struggled with doubt, but he stayed true to his calling—even at the cost of his life. In spite of this, John the Baptizer was far from a victim and far from a loser. Jim Elliot was right: "He is no fool who gives what he

cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

## A GREAT MODEL

For young athletes, one of the methods for learning a sport is to find a role model to emulate. For young golfers it might be Tiger Woods. For young soccer players it could be Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho. For basketball players it could be Michael Jordan. Soon these young aspiring athletes are dressing like their heroes, walking like their heroes, and attempting to play the game like their heroes. We all need someone to point the way and to be an example that we can follow.

When it comes to spiritual living, Jesus is our ultimate example. But Jesus Himself said of John:

*Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than*

*John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he (Lk. 7:28).*

I can't imagine anything more humbling than to have Christ Himself describe you as great. Yet, as we have examined the life of John the Baptizer, greatness seems to be the last thing he would have aspired to. He was far more concerned about the greatness of Christ—and perhaps that helps explain the Lord's words about him.

## THE GREATNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIZER

Why did Jesus describe John as the greatest of all prophets? Let me offer a suggestion. The prophets of the Old Testament, like Moses and Elijah, were given the responsibility of taking God's message to people's hearts and delivering it clearly and passionately. Some, like

Malachi, prophesied about the forerunner of Messiah, John the Baptizer. Others, like Isaiah and Zechariah, prophesied about Messiah Himself. But John was different.

John the Baptizer's role was not merely one of proclamation, he was challenged with preparing the way for Messiah. It was a responsibility that could easily have caused him to lose his balance. But John's greatness is perhaps best explained by his trustworthiness. He could be trusted with the most important mission because his heart was fully committed to the Christ of the mission.

This is what makes spiritual greatness so easily misunderstood. We tend to look for greatness in the form of talent or brilliance. We tend to measure greatness by charisma or accomplishment. The

example of John the Baptizer forces us to reexamine and recalibrate our definition of greatness.

If greatness were measured by fame, Isaiah or Daniel might have been the greatest of the prophets. If wonder and passion were the measure of greatness, Ezekiel or Jeremiah might win the day. But as great as they were, Jesus assigned greatness to John. His primary qualification? He was faithful to the message and the mission of Messiah. So Jesus called him great.

## **THE GREATNESS OF THE LEAST IN THE KINGDOM**

Jesus went on to say that the "least" significant member of the kingdom was even greater than John. What does this mean?

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe offers some helpful thoughts. He wrote:

How is the least person

in the kingdom greater than John? In position, not in character or ministry. John was a herald of the King, announcing the kingdom; believers today are children of the kingdom and the friends of the King (Jn. 15:15). John's ministry was a turning point in both the nation's history and in God's plan of redemption (*Be Compassionate*, p.78).

The fact that John was the herald of the kingdom but believers in Christ are citizens of the kingdom describes the contrast of position well. Put another way, however, it becomes even stronger. In John 3, Christ was describing His marriage to His bride, the church. John was the greatest of the prophets and had the privilege of being the "best man" at the wedding ("the friend of the bridegroom" in John 3:29).

The believer in Christ, however, is a part of His bride.

What a privilege it is to be part of God's family! We would be wise to respond with the same grace, courage, and humility that John exhibited in response to being the forerunner of Messiah. What greater way could there be for us to honor our King than to live our lives with the passion of John the Baptizer, who said of Jesus: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30).

That is true greatness.

## TRUE GREATNESS

**H**ow can the theme of greatness impact our living and thinking today? It depends on where we are on our spiritual journey.

If you've never placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, it's important to

understand the greatness of salvation.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came in human flesh to give His life as payment for our sins—sins that create a barrier between us and the God who loves us.

The forgiveness that Jesus' sacrifice secured is available to all—a great salvation (Heb. 2:3) that can't be ignored. It's the only available path to a right relationship with God and eternal life.

If you have not experienced this great salvation, talk to the God who loves you. Admit your sins and failures and ask Him for the forgiveness His Son purchased for you. It's the first step of a new life that lasts forever.

For those of us who already know Christ, there's even more to consider—like our trademark. What's our distinctive characteristic? What example are we

setting for others to follow?

John's example to us was one of consistently advancing Christ rather than himself. And it's an example worth following. In a world driven by self-interest, we have the privilege and opportunity of higher purpose. John's declaration in John 3:30 ("He must increase, but I must decrease") finds a practical description in the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31.

*Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

Even in the most basic things of life, we are challenged to choose Christ and His honor. In all life's circumstances, we are reminded to place His reputation in the forefront of our thinking. In doing that, may we, like John, seek to put Jesus first—and point the world to Him.

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