

## JOHN THE BAPTIST—GOD’S STRANGE CHOICE

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February 24, 2008

Mark 1:1-11

When I was in seminary, our Old Testament professor was fond of repeating a saying he had heard before: “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” He wasn’t being anti-Semitic. He was speaking of the difficulty God encountered when He made the Jews his chosen people, especially so during the wilderness wanderings.

I expect, however, that whoever God had chosen, there would have been the same difficulty. Not all tribes would have been so stubborn as Moses’ followers; but we are all as sinful; we are all stubborn and recalcitrant; we have all come short of God’s expectations; in brief, we are all sinners.

Perhaps God did make a strange choice in choosing the Jews. But doesn’t He make such strange choices all the time? When He chose Elijah, He made a strange choice. When He chose John the Baptist, He made a strange choice. When He chose you and me, He made a strange choice. God is unconventional. He makes strange choices; and surely the choice of the Forerunner of Jesus was a strange one.

I. THE STRANGE MAN. Luke reminds us that John the Baptist was the son of elderly parents, Zacharias the priest, and his wife Elisabeth, a cousin of the Virgin Mary. He was 6 months older than Jesus. When Mary visited Elisabeth, the baby John leapt in her womb, we assume, for joy that the Messiah was being born, the one he was chosen to introduce to the world.

The next time we hear of John the Baptist he is down near the Dead Sea, in a place called Aenon, preaching and baptizing the people who came to him. God had chosen this strange man to do a work for Him. He must have looked like Elijah of the Old Testament. The *Interpreters Bible* says of his strange clothing, “Not the soft, luxurious garments worn by wealthy potentates, but the rough mantle of the nomads...” In fact, the clause used is from II Kings 1:8, according to the *Interpreters Bible*, where Elijah is described. His fashion was that of a hermit, an ascetic, one who was totally antisocial. But John’s clothing of camels hair and leather, even to the people of that day, was strange, very strange.

Moreover his diet was exceedingly strange. He lived on locusts, those very active large grasshoppers that sometimes created plagues in that land, and wild honey that could often be found in the mountains. His protein and his calories were obtained in a very strange, and to most, a very unsavory way. Dieting today is as American as apple pie; but not many Americans would follow The Baptist Diet.

But God often makes such choices. He chose an Iraqi named Abraham to be the father of His people; He chose the deceiver Jacob to be Israel, the great leader; He chose the young lad Joseph to save his starving brothers; He chose Moses, from the household of Pharaoh, to lead His household; He chose the coward Gideon to be the courageous deliverer; He chose Rahab the Harlot to be the instrument in conquering the City of Jericho; He chose Ruth the Moabitess to be the direct ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth; He

chose young David, with the ruddy face, to be Israel's greatest king whose kingdom would last forever. Then He chose John the Baptist!

But look at American History, and the choices God has made. He chose a brilliant philosopher named Jonathan Edwards, a man whose voice was rather soft, who read his sermon word for word, holding a candle as he read, and looking through extremely thick lenses—God chose him to start the Great Awakening. He chose an uneducated shoe salesman named D.L. Moody to start another Great Revival in both England and America. And on and on.

II. A STRANGE MISSION. Not only was John a strange man, when you think about it, John was anointed for a strange mission. His mission was a prophetic mission. It had been 400 years since the voice of the last prophet had been heard in the land. Now the thunderous voice of a new prophet is heard. John was a prophet in the very mold of the Old Testament prophets. Strange indeed that the great voices of prophets had been silenced in the land, silenced not by death and persecution, silenced rather by God Himself. Listen! God is again going to speak! He has chosen a strange instrument named John, called the 'baptizer' because he was baptizing people. God is again going to say something extremely important to Israel. John is the Prophet God has chosen.

Strange it is that God would wait for 400 years to send another Prophet to Israel. And it is also strange that this prophet was prophesied to come. Verse 2 of Mark says, "As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare the way before thee." This prophecy is probably a combination of Exodus 23:20, and Malachi 3:1. John is to be the Messenger, or angel, God will send to Israel. But listen to Malachi: "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, who ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts."

As far as I know, John is the only Prophet to be prophesied to come. He was different than any other prophet—and he was greater than any other prophet. The other prophets had the role of preaching righteousness to Israel so that they might return to the covenant made with their fathers and avoid the consequences of unrighteousness and apostasy. The mighty prophets like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah preached the judgment of God upon the sins of God's people. But here is Malachi, the last of the Prophets, prophesying that God would send another prophet. This prophet is different. Oh yes, he will also preach judgment; but he has a different role. He is the prophet who will be The Messenger. He is the greatest Prophet because his task is to 'prepare the way' for the coming Messiah; to prepare the way for the entrance of God into human history; to prepare the way for the Incarnate Christ; to prepare an un-Godly people, a rebellious people, to repent and meet the Messiah.

I think you will agree, the Mission is a strange one, first to prepare the people to meet God, and then to be the person to introduce God to them as he comes to His Holy Temple. John was a prophet when there was no prophet; John was a prophet prophesied by the Prophets; John was a prophet whose mission it was to prepare and declare, and to prepare by declaring—and then to introduce to them the great God Himself. That was a strange Mission.

III. FURTHERMORE, JOHN HAD A STRANGE MESSAGE. His message was that men should repent of sin. In Matt 3:1-2 we find these words: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, And saying, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Mark 1:4 says, “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” The *Interpreters Bible* says, “Baptism of repentance is a *Semitism*, meaning ‘a baptism which symbolized or expressed repentance.’ As it still is, baptism merely symbolized outwardly what had already happened inwardly, and should not be construed to support a theology that baptism is the way to repent. The people came from all around to this strange ‘baptizer’ and were baptized in the Jordan River. They repented of their sins because that was what John preached, and when they had repented they were baptized. In fact, John warned them to ‘bring fruit meet for repentance,’ implying that they were refused baptism if they had not repented.

This message was a strange message for these people. They believed that they were the ‘righteous’ and that the Gentile Romans and the half-breed Samaritans were the real sinners. The absolute audacity of this weird little man, dressed in camels hair, looking like a savage, telling them they must repent! Far better if he would just be like Jonah and leave the country and preach to the heathen Ninevites – but not to them! Here he was, however, standing by the river, preaching repentance, and baptizing all who came to him with a true sense of repentance.

But – is it different today? How many preachers truly preach repentance? How many proclaimers are true to their heritage? Those who preach repentance, those who are true to their heritage, must, in this day, be considered ‘strange.’ The cult of positive thinking, the sect of Divine permissiveness, the religion of comfortable Christianity, is flooding the church with worldliness, apathy and atrophy. We need more Johns to preach truth to the religious, to confront the powerful with the message of judgment, and, if need be, to lose their heads in the cause of truth and justice. John preached such a strange message, and it resulted in his death. It is a bitter message indeed, but it is the only message that makes men prepared to meet a holy God. Like bitter medicine, repentance may be bitter to the listener, but it is the only healing message that can be preached to sinners, and since we are all sinners, we all need this message.

IV. JOHN WAS A STRANGE MAN, WITH A STRANGE MISSION, AND A STRANGE MESSAGE, PREACHING ABOUT A STRANGE MESSIAH. That Messiah was a major theme of the Old Testament, the very hope of Israel, the Message of the Prophets, and the sweet songs of the Psalmist. He is ‘like unto Moses,’ the ‘suffering Servant of Isaiah,’ the King who will reign on the throne of David, the King of an everlasting kingdom in Daniel.

They knew He was coming, but when He came they didn’t know Him. Had John failed? Had his message gone unheeded? In that prison near Masada, he wondered; and sent his disciples to find out before he died by beheading, if his ministry had been in vain.

What about that message of the Messiah. The first part of John’s message was repent and be baptized to show you have repented; the second part of John’s message was Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah: and He is different!

1<sup>st</sup> John preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand, meaning that the King of Kings was present, walking in their midst, and living as a Peasant. About 90 percent of

the people in Jesus' day were derisively called 'am ha'rets, the people of the land.' Most of them were nominally religious Jews who seldom attended services, and only went to required festivals. Nor did they keep the scribal laws and Jewish observances. So, they were rejected by the religious leaders and scorned by the pious. Jesus, the King, was probably brought up to be a "good" Jew; yet, to a large degree, since his sympathy was with them, he could be labeled as an 'am ha'rets'. The King lived as a peasant, a commoner, a carpenter, even though, being the firstborn, he would become at age 30 a rabbi. Isn't it strange though that this Messiah had no white horse to ride into Jerusalem, just a donkey, and no stable of horses like the fabled horses of the fabled King Solomon. He was just a commoner-King.

But according to John, this Commoner-King was the King of the Kingdom. In the Book of John the Pharisees asked John if he is the Messiah. His reply is, Jn.1:26-27: "John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;" "He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." In other words, Jesus is the King of the Kingdom of God. He is the Messiah. Just as Samuel, God's prophet, anointed David to be King, God Himself has anointed His Son, born of David's lineage, to be King. This commoner is not just a commoner. He is God Incognito! He is the Word made flesh and dwelling among us.

Furthermore, this King is not just a King, He alone can save us from our sin. Yes, we must truly repent. But that is just half the message. When we have repented we are ready to believe in Him, that is, to meet Him, and to be forgiven through His sacrifice for all our sin. For, in John's Gospel, John the Baptist saw Jesus and cried out, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Jn. 1:29. What a strange Messiah indeed! He had to be sacrificed like a lamb for sin. And since He was the only sinless sacrifice only He could purchase our salvation from a Perfect God. As Paul implied, a perfect and just God could only forgive and still be just if He forgave through the sacrifice of a Perfect Person, namely Jesus of Nazareth. No doubt John is thinking of the daily sacrifices offered twice each day upon the sacred temple altar—at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. But he must also be thinking about Isaiah 53, where the great prophet Isaiah identified the Messiah as a Suffering Servant dying for the sins of the people.

He is still a strange Messiah. I have had others ask me why Jesus had to die for them. They see no need for another to die on a cross for their sin. If they were perfect, there would be no need for Jesus to die for them. But since they need a perfect savior, they cannot save themselves. Paul's argument in Romans convinces me that all—Jew and Gentile—"that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." And, I am convinced by experience that I am a sinner, and that sin destroys all peace of heart and mind, and that we must all stand in judgment for our earthly deeds before a righteous and holy God that could result in eternal calamity if we are not "righteous" before God. That righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ. "The just shall live by faith."

John preached about a strange Messiah who would replace him, who was so great that he was not worthy to unlatch his sandals. John saw Jesus as a Being in Magnitude above all human beings. He was man, but much, much more than man. And that caused John, that strange man, with a strange mission, preaching a strange message, to say to his followers, some of whom would soon be followers of Jesus, Mk 1:8 "I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost." John confesses

his manhood. He is not the Messiah. He can only do so much, preach truth so much, and lead people so far. Then it is up to them; then it is up to Jesus. As a man, John can baptize the body; only Jesus can baptize the soul. As a man, John can preach the truth; only Jesus is the Truth. As a man, John can prepare the way; only Jesus is the Way. As a man, John can preach about life; only Jesus is the Life. He is a strange Messiah indeed; but he is the only Messiah that can save your soul; he is the only Messiah who can give you the saving baptism of the Holy Spirit. You can receive that Baptism today.