

I Met Jesus: John the Baptist

John 1:29-36; 3:22ff.

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It is always exciting to start a new series and today is that day. Our series is entitled, *I met Jesus: Encounters with Jesus from the Gospel of John*. In this series we are going to meet some famous people, some notorious people, and some people lost in the shuffle. What they all have in common is that they met Jesus and that experience changed them.

I am excited about this because it has been quite awhile since we have taught from one of the gospels and I am very much looking forward to a fresh look at Jesus' life and ministry.

Background on the Gospel of John

What is a "gospel?"

Gospel literally means "good news." In the New Testament literature, John is one of four books in the New Testament that are designated "gospels": Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the "synoptic gospels." What does synoptic sound like? Synonym. Same. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the same gospels meaning their content is very similar. John is unique in what it includes that the others don't and what it doesn't include that the others do.

Still they are all gospels and a gospel is a genre of literature that seeks to paint a portrait. Don't come to John thinking you're going to get a chronological biography of Jesus like you might read on Churchill or Lincoln. John's goal is not to give an exact history, although it is historical. The goal John has is to paint a portrait of Jesus using theological colors. He includes stories and teachings that portray Jesus as he intends. They are arranged and presented according to what the portrait needs. Each gospel writer is giving us a perspective on Jesus as they saw Him. The orders of things don't match up exactly between the gospels and some of the details are confusing. Why? It is a portrait NOT a photograph.

Who Wrote John?

The famous boxer George Foreman has five sons all named George. That's a lot of Georges. It is kind of like that reading the New Testament when it comes to the name John. There is the gospel of John. The disciple John. John the Baptist. There was a John on a council in Jerusalem. To complicate things, a guy named John wrote the book of Revelation. And the writer of the gospel of John didn't use his own name, but rather simply referred to himself as "the disciple Jesus loved." Further, the gospel of Mark was written by John Mark. If his gospel went by his name John, then his gospel would have been 1 John making what we call the gospel of John 2 John. And that would make what we call 1 John, 3 John. 2 John would be 4th John. 3 John would be 5th John. And don't forget John wrote revelation. Such confusion!

So who is he? There are debates about everything and it's true for this authorship. We can be confident that the author of this gospel was the disciple John, the brother of James. He was a member of the inner circle of disciples along with James and Peter. He became an Apostle of the church in Acts. He wrote this gospel, 1, 2, 3 John and the book of Revelation.

He also pastored the church at Ephesus. When I was recently there, the traditional spot of his grave in Ephesus looks like this:



Purpose of the Letter

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

This is a wonderful verse and it is so encouraging to realize that what we know about Jesus' life is just a sample. John ends his gospel with, *"Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."* (John 21:25)

Think of all that Jesus did and said that we don't even know. I hope someday we get to watch His life. Are there DVD series in heaven? *Jesus: the Early Years...* But this purpose statement says the goal is that you may believe in Jesus' identity as Christ and Son of God. The goal is more than believing, it is that by believing we may obtain personally the gift of eternal life. Echoes of John 3:16.

Our series is going to focus on the people of this gospel and what happened when their lives intersected with the Christ. I want to ask you to come each week. You don't know which character might be the one whose life is where yours is and whose moment with Jesus may be the moment your life needs as well.

John the Baptist

With that introduction, our time is pressed with our first "I met Jesus" biography. Let me tell you about a man ironically, also named John. The Apostle John introduces him in the sixth verse of the whole gospel, and other than Jesus, is the first person mentioned.

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light." (John 1:6-8)

That's all it says. His name was John. His role was to bear witness to the light, which verse 4 identifies as the light of life found in Christ. Immediately he sets straight a confusion relevant to the day – John was not that light. You see, this John was a great man. Famous. Successful by any standard. He was so great a man that the people of the day wondered aloud, *"Might he be the long prophesied Messiah?"* Look at verse 19 and following:

"And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:19-23)

Why they thought he might be the actual Messiah requires a little look into his story....

- An angel foretold his birth (Luke 1:5-24)
- His was a miraculous conception; his parents were "advanced in years" (Luke 1:18)
- His appearance and dress were like the prophet Elijah (Mark 1:6)
 - *"Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." (Mark 1:6)*

He becomes known as John the Baptist which I have found some humor in because the way he looked, John the Baptist wouldn't be welcome in many Baptist churches. He wasn't polished or well groomed. He had no seminary degree. He lived in the wilderness. He ate stuff your teenagers would call "gross." His hair, beard, and bodily smell would have said to his culture and ours, this is a "unique" individual.

His message of repentance, judgment, and baptism shook the people of his day. Matthew's account says all Judea, Jerusalem, and the countryside was going to him to hear and be baptized. Huge crowds. Huge effect. Powerful message of judgment and repentance from sin. This was an extraordinary individual and there were whispers throughout the whole land. *He is so different. He is so special. He is so powerful. He is so intriguing. He is so popular. Dare we say it; might he be the Chosen one? Might he be the Messiah?*

Let me ask you this; let's just say that you were John the Baptist. From the time you could remember, your Mom and Dad told you about how an angel announced you would be born. Your whole life growing up, as you walked around town, people would point and whisper, *That kid is special. An angel gave him his name. His mom was like really old when she had him.* Your whole life you had a special anointing from the Holy Spirit. As a young man in your 20s, you begin to preach and massive crowds show up hanging on your every word. Then to top it off, you hear the whispers which become bold questions, *Are you the fulfillment of prophecy? You are so special, so wonderful, you are changing so many people's lives...you need a haircut and a bath but we can deal with it. Are you the Messiah?*

What would we naturally expect in a man whose whole life was so exceptional and supernaturally distinguished? If he didn't say it, at least perhaps to think, *Maybe I am! That would explain the angels, the near miraculous conception, my incredible following. Maybe I am!* Who wouldn't be severely tempted to be filled with some self-importance? An inflated sense of me. Think of how much we struggle with it – and there was no angel announcing our births.

This is why John the Baptist is so remarkable. The man who Jesus said, was the greatest ever born of a woman, in his own eyes was something totally different. When did they meet?

"And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy

Spirit. ' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.' " (John 1:32-34)

This is John's recounting of the day Jesus came to be baptized by him. God had somehow communicated to him that he would know who the real Messiah is by a sign – the Holy Spirit would descend on that person. When that happens, that person is the Messiah. Can you see him baptizing? Always looking. Always wondering. He knows He's somewhere.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him. (Matthew 3:16)

Imagine this for John. He's baptized thousands of people. All of a sudden, there's Jesus. He senses it even before he baptized Him. Can you see the look on John's face as he looks at Jesus, water dripping down His face, no doubt smiling, then to look up and see the Holy Spirit come down? It was the very sign God gave to him. Heaven thunders, *This is my beloved Son!* (Matthew 3:17) This was John's moment. He met Jesus. From that moment on, his ministry began to fade as Jesus' ministry begins. What do we see and hear from John the Baptist?

In His Own Words

"I am not worthy to untie his sandal"

"Every service which a slave performs for his master, a disciple will perform for his teacher, except to untie his sandal-strap." (A rabbi, Bruce, p. 51)

In the custom of the day, to untie the sandal strap was beneath even a slave. It was too menial. It was too degrading. Yet John says that when he evaluates his status next to Jesus, he wasn't worthy of even touching His sandal strap.

This can't be John saying this, can it? Gabriel himself heralded his birth. Jesus said he was the greatest man born of a woman. The political and spiritual leaders of the day sought him out. This was an extraordinary man in history. If anyone could at least qualify to undo Jesus' sandal, it was John. Just the sandal, right? The greatest man born of woman could at least touch the sandal, couldn't he?

Now we are at the key to John's greatness. What was his secret? He knew his place. He knew what real greatness was.

- *I am not the Christ.*
- *I am not Elijah*
- *I am not the Prophet.*
- *I am a voice crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."*

One effect of an encounter with Jesus is that we understand who we really are, not who we think we are; not who our parents tell us we are or who our admirers tell us we are. The glory of Jesus as perceived by eyes of faith puts us in our place. This is the kingdom ethic: greatness in the kingdom is to be the servant of all. How do we get there? Greatness in the kingdom is being the last who someday will be first. This is an attitude and a self-identity. When we by faith meet Jesus in His gospel, it creates a gospel humility in us.

We understand the weightiness of who we really are as sinners and the glory of Christ as the Son of God. Savior. Messiah. When those two come together, I am put in my place and

I embrace that place. It is a position of humility and a place of happiness. John was the greatest because John wouldn't touch the sandal.

Where do we see ourselves? *Look at me! Look what I can do! Look what I have done! I'm important!* Really? Any angels announce your birth? Anyone wonder if you are the prophesied Messiah? The guy who had that, wouldn't touch the sandal.

Write it down, when I have an inflated sense of me, I am ignoring the glory of Christ and that such as He would die for me. I'm not talking about walking around with a sign that says, *I am a loser*. That's just another form of pride. It was John's Christ-shaped comparative assessment that determined his sense of his own importance. This freed him to be John the Baptist. He wasn't obsessed with himself. He was free to live for Christ's glory.

"The gospel doesn't just free you from what other people think about you, it frees you from what you think about yourself." (Buzzard) John the Baptist was the greatest man who ever lived because he was the freest man who ever lived; free to live for the glory of Christ.

"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Later in John's story he is arrested by Herod and put in a remote prison. While in prison he has time to think, and in spite of seeing the Holy Spirit descend and hearing the thundering voice of the Father, he begins to have some creeping doubts. So he sends word to Jesus with a question, *"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* (Matthew 11:2)

Really? John the Great doubted? I can hear Thomas telling people in heaven when they call him "Doubting Thomas," "John doubted too!" They all doubted at times. Too often we put these people on the hero pedestal and miss the moments like this when they are just like us. Who here hasn't doubted at times? Wondered at times, *"Is it really true? Is He really the Savior?"* Looked into the sky and thought, *"Is there really a God?"* It's easy to believe when the crowds are huge and God is doing amazing things, but when your life feels more like a prison and nobody's shouting your name anymore, *"Jesus are you real?"*

He doubted. Are you doubting today? Are you worried that your doubts may mean you don't have faith or that you are a spiritual failure? Look at John the Greatest who also was John the Doubting and see that God has room in His grace for our humanity and our moments of weakness.

"He must increase, but I must decrease"

After Jesus' baptism, John's ministry begins to diminish. His disciples come to him greatly worried because more people are going to Jesus than to John. John should be worried. His polls are down. His numbers are down. His stature is down. His influence is down. Yet perhaps his most famous words are his response, *He must increase, but I must decrease*. (John 3:30)

Here we see John's true greatness. John was great because in his own eyes, John was small. The test of our self-assessment is not when things are good, but when things are bad and hard. Am I okay with less of me if it means more of Him? It's like a teeter-totter. It's been awhile, but do you remember the teeter-totter? For one person to go up the other person has to go down. True spiritual greatness is when my goal is to go down so that through my life Jesus can go up. G.K. Chesterton said it another way, "Alice must grow small if she is to be Alice in Wonderland."

Could it be that we are missing some of what God could do here in our church and in your life because we refuse to grow small? The glory of Christ and what He did for us, when properly understood, shrinks us. The Cross says we're sinners. The Cross says we are under judgment. The Cross says we can't do it. The Cross says we can't save ourselves. But as we embrace what Christ's cross says, and as we shrink, something truly wonderful happens. He gets bigger. His sacrifice gets bigger. God's love gets bigger. But once we are small, now the wonderland of God's grace overwhelms us and God's love assures us and the wonder of it all amazes us. *Amazing love! how can it be That Thou my God, shouldst die for me! (And Can It Be? Public Domain)*

Thank you John the Greatest for showing us that to be the greatest we have to aspire to be the smallest.

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