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What Made John the Baptist So Special?

John 1:23: (NASB) *He said, I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as Isaiah the prophet said.*



Every so often someone comes along who stands out from the crowd, someone who distinguishes themselves from their peers by their manner, their motivation and their mission. They do not seem to fit into any comfortable category, for theirs is a mission that has world-changing implications and such missions are not common, and least of all comfortable. With such a description, we would typically and rightfully envision Jesus as its object, but today we will focus on another. Today we focus on John the Baptist, the man who prepared the people for Jesus, the man who stood alone as a powerful voice who pointed to the Redeemer of all men. John the Baptist uniquely epitomized greatness. Where did he come from, what did he do and how did he do it?

Everything about John the Baptist was unique, beginning with the conditions of his birth.

Many people in Scripture can be better understood by examining where they came from:
Luke 1:5-7:

John's heritage:

Zacharias: Strongs #2197 Zacariav Zacharias of Hebrew origin;
Zacharias = "remembered of Jehovah"

Elizabeth: Strongs # 1665 elisabet Elisabet el-ee-sab'-et of Hebrew origin;
Elisabeth = "oath of God"

(Source: Biblical commentary by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown) *course of Abijah* - the eighth of the 24 orders of courses into which David divided the priests (see 1 Chronicles 24:1,4,10). Of these courses only four returned after the captivity (Ezra 2:34-39), which were again subdivided into 24 - retaining the ancient name and order of each. They took the whole temple service for a week each. Zacharias was on one of the 24 "teams" of worship.

(Source: Biblical commentary by John Lightfoot) *his wife was of the daughters of Aaron* - the priests might marry into any tribe, but it was most commendable of all to marry one of the priests' line. John's parents were faithfully devoted to serving God.

(Source: Biblical commentary by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown) *Commandments and ordinances* - the one expressing their moral - the other their ceremonial - obedience [CALVIN and BENGEL], (Compare Hebrews 9:1.)

Not having children in those days was looked at as a sign of disfavor or unfaithfulness. Elizabeth being barren shows the will of God in the birth, not the will of men. God was about to introduce one of the greatest prophets in the world.

Greatness Ingredient: Circumstantial Preparation - The man chosen to pave the way for Jesus needed strong parental influence to raise him and teach him godly reverence and godly knowledge.

If you are a parent, consider it a calling to bring your children up with a strong guidance of godliness in their lives.

Appearances do not always reflect reality - barrenness was considered a sign of a lack of faith: Luke 1:13,15-16

Greatness Ingredient: Access to Necessary Tools - The man chosen to pave the way for Jesus needed clear and focused access to God's influence to achieve the greatness of his calling.

**John the Baptist was set to be a prophet of God even before birth.
Did this override his free choice?**

The whole idea of our free will is easily misunderstood. Every child born is taught and told things from infancy by not only parents, but a whole host of other influencers as well, and we never complain about those things. To teach John that he would be a chosen vessel of God was simply raising him up in the way that he should go.

What was the source of the command to Zacharias for his son to be "separated"? It was the Nazarite Vow, a vow of sanctification, being set apart.



There were three outward elements to this vow. The first was what a person did and did not eat and drink: Numbers 6:1-8: His life would be sober, reflected in what he would eat and drink (and not eat and drink!). Second, his appearance stressed that all of his attention would be on what he was doing; everything else was not material. Third was what you did and did not do. Staying clean was important. This was a serious way to bring up a child, with dedication and focus. This is why his parents had to be the right people, steeped in understanding and following the Law.

(Source: John Gill's Exposition of the Bible) There were various sorts of Nazarites; some were appointed by God, as Samson; some were devoted by their parents, as Samuel; and some by themselves, concerning whom is this law more especially; some were perpetual Nazarites, a Nazarite for life, as the two persons just mentioned; though the Jews distinguish between a Samsonian Nazarite, and a perpetual one; and some were only for a certain time, according as they vowed.

Interesting side note: Samson and Samuel were also born to mothers who had previously been barren and were both dedicated to God's service as John was.

Greatness Ingredient: Experiential Grooming - Greatness is a result of being groomed by your learning and experiences to fulfill the difficulties of your at hand task.

What kind of greatness do YOU have the opportunity to fulfill in the service of God? What can you do to bring others to see the greatness of God?

Back to the description of John to Zacharias by the angel: Luke 1:17 John grew up to look, act and fulfill the role that was prophesied about him: Matthew 3:4 2 Kings 1:7-8: Elijah was known just by how he looked, and so was John.

Greatness Ingredient: Discipline - Greatness requires not only preparation, it also requires complete follow through. John was disciplined enough to LIVE his role with zeal and completeness!

The work of John the Baptist would prove to be powerful, dangerous, transformational and short-lived. According to prophecy, he had but one mission - to prepare the Jewish world for the coming of their Messiah. To speak of this task is easy, but to accomplish this task would require the full bending of all his will and energy to this one goal.

He was to be so different on every level for every moment of his life. It required incredible greatness and the power of God to be able to do such things.

Luke 3:1-6: (NASB) (Selected verses) ¹Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar... ²...the word of God came to John...in the wilderness. John knew he had work to do but did nothing proactive until he was clearly instructed. He sprang into action once the word came to do so. ³And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... ⁶...and all flesh will see the salvation of God. John KNEW he was that voice and he KNEW what that voice was to proclaim! (See John 1:23) He was there to serve a specific purpose.

Greatness Ingredient: Clearly Defined Purpose - The most telling measurement of greatness is the clarity and importance of its purpose.

John takes this clarity and boldly speaks as no one had spoken in 400 years as a direct mouthpiece of God. The last words of the Old Testament in Malachi introduced John followed by 400 years of prophetic silence. Greek influence began to corrupt Judaism and a lot of the Jewish thinking went down the wrong pathway. The silence was discouraging and damaging. John had a difficult task in front of him.

His general message was one of brutal honesty with no allowance for excuses: Luke 3:7-16:
His first message: God is sovereign and deserves your reverence. Repent of your sins!
His second message: Love your neighbor as yourself.
His third message: Uphold the Law - respect your neighbor as your equal.
His fourth message: Use strength and power justly and contentedly.
His fifth message: Watch and wait for true greatness is coming.



Greatness Ingredient: Truth Driven Conviction - The most telling application of greatness is in the value of what it opens its recipients to. In this case they were opened to receive their Messiah!

John was preparing the people not only for the one who would save them, but he who would also save every man, woman and child who ever lived.

**John was absolutely mighty in the hand of God!
How did Jesus react to John's might and position?**

The interactions between Jesus and John the Baptist were unique as they were happening at the most major crossroad in world history. John was the last of the prophets of the Law and Jesus was the first of the heavenly call. The respect and honor between them was powerful and productive.

John was masterfully teaching, challenging and baptizing the crowds. He was the lone voice of God's direction in the midst of the clamor and noise of a society that had lost its way.

Then Jesus came: Matthew 3:13-17: We see the power of John. He recognized Jesus. Here was the man his entire life was focused on announcing. It had all come to this moment. To John's surprise, Jesus walks up to him to be baptized.

¹⁵But Jesus answered him, Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. Then he consented.

It did not take an explanation other than, "This is the way it must be; trust me."

¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.

The power of this experience must have been dramatic! John fulfilled what he was supposed to do and in a moment understood this was the beloved son of God. People needed to stop looking to John and start looking to Jesus.

John never questioned his role or his respect for his master Jesus. Jesus' arrival signaled John's end.

John clearly saw his role in relation to Jesus: John 3:25-30: John's role was like a shooting star - a dazzling light that lives for but an instant - but in his case, it lit the way to find man's eternal light.

Greatness Ingredient: Humility - The most telling accomplishment of greatness is the humility and selflessness with which it is administered. John clearly loved his Lord more than his own role.

John would later lose his life as a result of his influence and his unrelenting stand for righteousness. After he was gone, Jesus, Peter, James and John experienced the transfiguration vision.

It was right after this vision that Jesus vividly established John's position as part of the company of Moses and Elijah: Matthew 17:9-13: They saw an amazing vision but they were not allowed to tell anyone about it until after Jesus rose from the dead. What was the explanation? They understood that *Elijah already came* meant John the Baptist. There is an incredible prophetic connection between Elijah and the relationship to John the Baptist.

Greatness Ingredient: Toughness - The most telling characteristic of greatness is the relentless toughness and grit it requires to be successful. John stood strong and often alone.

There is one more ingredient to John's greatness that completes it as a perfect example for us. To illustrate this last ingredient, we need to go back into John's life shortly before he was executed. He found himself in prison, an incarceration from which he would never see the light of day. But first:

Matthew 11:2-3: Why was John questioning if Jesus was the Messiah? What happened to him? He was in prison! Sometimes our expectations do not dovetail with reality and the result can be genuine doubt. Perhaps John thought that once Jesus was on the scene that he would become Jesus' greatest follower and advocate, continuing to bring people to Jesus. Sitting in



prison was not what he might have expected. The expectation of the Jews was that Messiah would come right then as a great leader, freeing them from Roman bondage. Expectation did not equal reality, which creates doubt. Jesus' answer was not a mere "yes, no worries," - his answer was laden with hope, prophetic fulfillment and personal blessing.

Jesus knew John's heart even though he was far away: Matthew 11:4-11: The answer reiterated prophecy John would recognize. He was reminded of the power of God. *And blessed is he who does not take offense at me* - John did not take offense and was blessed.

After sending an answer back to John, Jesus testified to the crowd of the faith, strength and greatness of John.

Jesus was plain...John was a prophet, appointed specifically by God to send them salvation: *⁷As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces! ⁹But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.*

Jesus then captures the glory of John the Baptist and the privilege of his work: *¹¹Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

What an amazing statement showing the great work of John the Baptist.

Greatness Ingredient: Imperfection - The most telling victory of true greatness in our broken world comes as a result of battling through one's personal doubts and fears to accomplish that which is one is called to do.

This final greatness ingredient is not being perfect or exactly on target. It is unexpected but true! It was okay that John doubted. This should bring us hope as we try to bring praise, honor and glory to God but we fall short. We can start fresh and move forward again.

Do not make this ingredient an excuse, make it a reason to work harder and use the other ingredients so you can stand straighter in your work for God. Together they are a recipe for greatness for the average person.

Back to John describing his calling and the utter joy of being in humble service of God's plan: John 3:29-33: John saw God's will in his life. The next time you are thinking about greatness, think about the exceptional character, devotion, passion and work of John the Baptist. Think about his focus. Think about his discipline. Think about his humility. And remember, he was imperfect just like you and me and yet, God saw fit to adorn him with a mantle of blessing and privilege.

We want to be great in God's sight doing God's work. Keep God first. That is the lesson of the greatness of John the Baptist.

*So, what made John the Baptist so special?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*