Heroes of the Faith Series

John the Baptist

Herald and Prophet

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Heroes of the Faith:
John the Baptist

We are going to explore the extraordinary ministry of a man whom Jesus described as the greatest of all the prophets, the one who God entrusted with the task of preparing the way for His Son to come to earth in human form. It was a powerful ministry that warred against the way that almost all the people were living. His ministry constitutes a call to us to prepare the way of the Lord in all that we are doing.

We will then move on to consider a few key issues that are happening in our society today at the social-political level – things that are threatening the freedom of the gospel in our midst, and which require the clear and outspoken challenge of a John the Baptist.

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Overview 1 Historical Context

Spiritually, no authentic prophet had brought a living word from God for four hundred years. Did God have nothing else to say to His people?

Suddenly, (what a wonderful word that is!) God commissioned John, not to follow in his father's steps and to become a priest, but to embark on something far more challenging – something that would take him right off the career ladder: to be a 'prophet of the Most High!' Given that there are are no slots in either the career office or the church newspaper set aside for this, what qualities do you, think are needed

to depend exclusively on the Lord God of Hosts and to exercise such a ministry?

Centuries before, the Lord had commissioned Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the other biblical greats. Now, after a four hundred-year gap, the Lord was set to revive the prophetic ministry. Little did people realize that this was destined to be the hinge on which the whole of spiritual history hangs: the transition point between the old and the New Covenants.

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him,
to give His people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."
And the child grew and became strong in spirit;
and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 1:76-80

Questions to ponder

As we look at the ministry of John Baptist as a prophet, what is your understanding of the role of the prophet?

Given that there are no job descriptions in either the career office or the church newspaper for a prophet of the Most High, what qualities do you, think are needed to depend exclusively on the Lord God of Hosts and to exercise such a ministry?

In the light of the long centuries of silence between God speaking to the nation of Israel, how do you cope when God does not appear to speak to you for a long time? Prolonged periods of waiting, with nothing to show for it, can test faith to the limit. Do you still believe what God has shown you when He seems exceedingly slow to resolve certain difficulties or to advance certain projects?

Overview 2: Why did God choose John the Baptist?

From our vantage point today, it is clear to us why the Lord should chose the particular place and time that He did to send His Son to Earth. Not only did it fulfill many Messianic prophecies, but Roman roads and sophisticated communication networks made it possible for the gospel to spread from the Jewish heartland to the ends of the world.

None of this would have been obvious at the time to John, of course. Set aside from birth by an angelic visitation, he lived an obscure life in an utterly inhospitable wilderness, on behalf of a nation that the all conquering Roman armies had reduced from a once mighty empire to a downtrodden province, presided over by the cruel Emperor Tiberius.

Knowing that God had called him to play a specific role, John devoted all his energies to the task. As Jesus would do for a much shorter period of time, he followed the Spirit's leading and went out to live in the wilderness, to pray and wait for God's timing to appear in public. Apart from the dark side of the moon, it is hard to imagine anywhere more inhospitable. But this was the place where God would meet with him.

God loves to speak to nations 'from the margins.' Whether it is Ezekiel in Babylon, or to John on the isle of Patmos, He knows our address, and can meet with us wherever He has placed us. John was destined to be a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Saviour, calling the people to turn from their sinfulness and to come home to their God.

Two questions to ponder

Knowing what the Lord is saying about a particular situation is a great asset; know what to do about it and when is often a separate art. We can get the first part right, but be too hasty with the second part, speaking out when God had shown us something primarily to pray about it until the right time comes to act on it. Occasionally, we go too far the other way, and sit on things we should be acting on.

Do you know where the heart of your own calling lies?

Overview 3: The Prophet's Role

> Much of the prophet's best and most important work is done in secret, wrestling for people's souls, paying the cost for meetings to be turned into encounters with the Lord.

In every generation, God has raised up watchmen and intercessors who understand what the Lord is saying to His people. Part of the cost of being prophetic intercessors is that we will be burdened by things that people are taking little or no notice of. This is how John and Paula Sandford put it in The Elijah Task, in the chapter 'In the spirit and power of Elijah:'

> *'When the church is rejoicing and celebrating the victory of our Lord, the prophet is already called to the next battle, the next pit of sorrow. The next work of the Lord is upon him. When the body of Christ is grovelling in pain and repentance, the prophet is rejoicing both that the body is repenting, and that the reward of the Lord's mercy's coming.'*

The fact that someone is a prophet does not mean they always need to be prophesying. Often they are simply there as father and mother figures to encourage others to develop latent gifts in others. If our calling to is serve and develop those who are destined to go further and faster than ourselves, that is truly good news – evidence of a job well done. It is their hidden life with God that makes this possible.

Reflection

As a church, are we good, bad or indifferent at making a framework for budding prophets? Are we too rigid and stifling a set up to support them, or do we stand with them as they learn their difficult craft. Remember, the Kingdom is about much more than just Church matters. God wants His people to be prophetic in their place of work, as well as in church meetings. Pray to grasp this concept – and for the power to move in the good of it.

Overview 4: Would you want to be a prophet?

John and Paula Sandford's excellent book *The Elijah Task* is an in-depth introduction to the role of the modern prophet, and provides invaluable insight into the stringent ways by which God trains His servants before they are safe to exercise this important ministry.

What do you think would be the principal challenges of this calling?

Overview 5: Sharp axe and winnowing fork: John preaches to the multitudes

> *'I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*
>
> *Mark 1:8*

John "exhorted" people to flee from things that lead to judgment. In 3:18, Luke uses the word *laos* to describe the people who came to hear John, as opposed to *ochlos* (meaning any old crowd). In other words, this was a potentially responsive group. These would have been the ones who stayed on to hear more of John's message – the proclamation of the 'good news' that lay beyond the serious warnings. (Luke 3:18)

Image wise, John the Baptist was no prototype James Bond. Here was no designer-clad showman, tempting people out into the wilderness to visit him. Nevertheless, Pharisees and Sadducees as well as commoners trekked out from places as far away as Jerusalem to hear him. They recognised that this man, so uncompromising in both appearance and message, had something important to communicate.

John neither flattered the great nor assented to the prevailing standards of morality. Using language as strong as that of any Old Testament prophet John did what every prophet must always do, breaking up the fallow ground. (cf Hos. 10:12) The difference lies in the declaration that is built into his call to repent: the promise that the kingdom of God is at hand. He warned of the coming wrath of God if people continued to sin. The commoner's faults may not have been as startlingly evident as those of many of the more hypocritical Sadducees and Pharisees, but in God's eyes they were just as serious.

There can be great power in making public proclomanations of our faith. In the course of many of the *Make Way* marches that have been hekd over the years in British towns and cities, many bystanders were touched, and police reported crime rates falling dramatically during the hours that the marches were under way.

What are we called to proclaim? We need people who are so steeped in the fear and the presence of the Lord that they can take us beyond people's desire to be entertained, and to show us how God really feels about situations. Some are being called to go out onto the streets and practice prophetic evangelism: speaking the things God gives them for the people they come across. Mark Stibbe's book *Prophetic Evangelism* is helpful in this respect.

At the height of his powerful ministry to the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, DL Moody preached to vast multitudes. The aristocratic classes found his American appearance and idioms positively vulgar – but his simple and direct way of communicating the gospel touched people's hearts, from highest to lowest born. (See Moody, by Pollock).

Not everyone could recognise John the Baptist as a messenger sent from God, any more than they would accept Jesus Himself. It has been the same story with every subsequent revival sent by God. There have always ben people who have missed what God is doing because the vessel by which He sends the revival doesn't fit in with their expectations. Can you think of any modern examples of this?

It is by no means automatic that our hearts are sufficently hungry and 'tuned in' to God to be able to receive the revivialists that He sends. Is there a sense in which the Lord almost deliberately offends our minds s that no flesh can take the glory? Can you think of modern day equivalents to DL Moody?

Every valley will be filled in (Luke 3:5)

The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?
"I the LORD search the heart
and examine the mind,
to reward a man according to his conduct,
according to what his deeds deserve. *(Jer.17:9-10)*

As cardiologists know, it is our heart condition that is all-important. Prophets see through the deceptions we throw up. Most of us have parts of our personality that incline to be calculating. It is a great delight to meet people who are single minded for the Lord. Most of the time, far too little of the Lord's light reaches our hearts in the Western Church. It is as though the overhanging trees and foliage (our traditions and lack of hunger and thirst for God's presence) deflect the sunlight before it reaches the forest floor – our hearts.

Paul said of Timothy that he was the only one who really had Christ's interest at heart rather than his own self-interests. May the Lord develop that same spirit in us. (Phil. 2:20-21)

Lord, let John the Baptist's challenge shake our complacencies. Break wrong patterns, heal the brokenness and equip us to facilitate others to do all that they are called to do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

There were Pharisees and Sadducees present when John baptised, but we do not find them asking, "What shall we do?" They thought they knew what they had to do as well, so they weren't going to take any notice of an odd bod like John. Pride, self-sufficiency and stubbornness are such enemies of God being able to move.

Echoing Isaiah's words, John tells us that *every valley will be filled in, and every mountain and hill low*. (Luke 3:5) How does this translate in our own experience?

The mountains are like our best and finest achievements. These are obtained by our mind sets, motivations, and dominant desires, and are the things we naturally gravitate towards. Even there, however, the Lord may have things to show us. Ponder the idea that our greatest strengths can also become our greatest weaknesses.

The valleys speak of our times of difficulty and depression. God is close to the broken hearted and He goes to great lengths to raise us up from our times of fear and failure – provided that we continue to cry out to Him. It is the rich and self-reliant who go away empty handed. He receives the needy who seek Him with all their hearts.

Preaching that cuts to the quick

John preached a message of repentance that was tailored to the hearts of his hearers. What is the thing that God would speak to you that will help you to draw closer to Him? To repent of doubt or letting fear hold you back? Or something much more specific?

John speaks about the axe being laid to the foot of the tree (Luke 3:9) It is not enough not to do wrong either: we are called to die altogether to the old way of living. The axe must go to the root of our whole corrupt nature. There is nothing good enough in us for us to be able to put our trust in.

Most of the people John was addressing knew that they had done wrong – and were prepared to ask what they could do to put matters right. This is a vital step. John told them that it was their duty to share what they had. His challenge was intended to goad them into doing what they could. Food and clothing are the two supports of life. It is so important to be aware of each other's needs and to watch out for each other. Ponder that thought now.

Only Luke records these conversations (Luke 3:7-18). They open up opportunity for some clear and challenging statements about social justice and responsibility.

Of the three groups mentioned in Luke 3:7-18, the tax collectors would have been considered most in need of repentance for the simple reason that their profit came from collecting more than they paid the Romans. Their work alienated them from others – but God had a place and a role for them too. First, however, they must stop exploiting people.

Who were the soldiers mentioned in Luke 3:14? Probably Jewish rather than Roman ones. Like the tax collectors, their role lent itself to threatening reprisals against people and taking advantage of people in trouble. John challenged them to be content with what they had (see Hebrews 13:5). Whether we are rich or poor by the world's standards, we can be rich in the presence of the Lord.

The soldiers' response, 'What about us: what shall we do?' (Luke 3:14) hints at how acutely they felt ostracized by the rest of society.

What John does not do is to tell them to hand in their commission and to desert the army. Rather, he urges that there is to be no oppression, no violence to their fellow men, no launching of false accusations and no settling of old scores. God has a role and a place for them too – right where they were.

A Question to reflect on

What do you feel the statements in Luke 3:7-18 have to say in a modern day context?

As surely as John fulfilled his ministry and prepared the way for Jesus, we must fulfill ours, too – and seek to live with just one audience in mind: the Lord Jesus Himself.

The highest price possible

'He must increase but I must decrease.' (John 3:30)

Some issues burn so brightly in our hearts that standing for truth means more to us than whether we ourselves live or die. John's words moved many to repentance – but they merely aroused resentment in others. Herod and his family, for example, hated being reproved by John, and had him imprisoned. Later, through the machinations of his wife and daughter, he was persuaded to have him beheaded. (Mark 6:20-29)

John was Christ's forerunner in suffering as well as in preaching. He had spent about a year and a half preparing people for Christ, but recognised that his destiny was to become less so that Christ could become more. When the Sun rises, the morning-star disappears. Nevertheless, his death must have deeply affected those who had benefited from his instruction and counsel – including his cousin Jesus. It must have *felt* like a sad and premature end for a fine ministry, that had served to bring hope to many.

Herod and his scheming family *appeared* to have won – but God was on the move. When the witch slays Aslan on the stone table, she congratulates herself that she has won the final victory. But death could not hold Aslan, any more than the beheading of John the Baptist

spelt the end of God's cause on earth. In a sense it ushered in the fulness of Jesus' yet more glorious ministry.

The highest praise possible

True greatness is an inner self-emptying which manifest itself in service to others. (Anon)

Jesus' assessment of John is that he was the greatest of all the prophets (John 5:35, cf Matt 11:9,11). The fact that John went through a period of perplexity in prison (Luke 7:18-22) in no way decreases his spiritual standing. Would we be any different if we were deprived of light, food, vitamins and fellowship? John may have allowed mental ideas of a Messianic kingdom on earth to take root in his heart, in which case it is no wonder that his faith takes a sharp dip at this point. Jesus' carefully weighted response to John's queries were intended to set such wrong perspectives to right. (Luke 7:20-23)

John was a great prophet even though he did no recorded miracles. It is important to spell out that New Testament prophets (unlike some of their Old Testament counterparts) are not the same as miracle workers. Philip's four daughters were prophetesses but we have no record of any signs and wonders done by them. Even Agabus did not necessarily do any miracles. They are primarily 'eyes' in the Body of Christ – and facilitators and enablers.

If the Lord allows us to be close to such people we are blessed. They provide reference points and steering touches for people's lives, as well as providing an accountability system. It is worth saying, however, that the devil does all he can to close people down who have a prophetic edge – as an in depth review of John Paul Jackson's *Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit* makes clear.

It is not the number of miracles, the size of our bank balance, or a place on prominent podiums that ensure that someone is doing well in God's kingdom. Jesus is quite content to work with the few, the least and the last. He honours those who are set on honouring Him with all their hearts.

Final Reflection: Preparing the way of the Lord

The Hebrew word for 'prepare' is 'pannu'. This speaks of removing all the obstacles that stand in God's path. If you are currently facing blocked paths, how about using some of these verses to raise your expectations?

No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love him,
but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. *1 Corinthians 10:2*

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. *John 14:2-4*

Now may our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus prepare (clear) the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May He strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.
1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

I'm passing this work on to you, my son Timothy. The prophetic word that was directed to you prepared us for this. All those prayers are coming together now so you will do this well, fearless in your struggle. *1 Timothy 1:18 Msg*

"Now get yourselves ready. I'm sending my angel ahead of you to guard you in your travels, to lead you to the place that I've prepared. *Exodus 23:20 Msg*

Lord, may we be ready for all You have in store for us. Train us, as You trained John the Baptist, to be comfortable on our own with you, but to be effective in company. May the Word of the Lord be as sharp as a two edged sword when it needs to be, but full of Your love and compassion to salve and to heal. In Jesus' name, Amen.