It’s What’s Inside
That Counts

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The Life of John the Baptist

“In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”” (Luke 1:5-17)

Zechariah and Elizabeth were members of a legalistic and puritanical community that lived in the wilderness. The community lived separate and apart from the rest of society, which they believed to be evil and corrupt before God. As an adult, “… Paul wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” (Matthew 3:4)
He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all those who came out to hear him. (This accounts for the name John the Baptist or John the Baptizer.) John proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:7,8)

“This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is 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 ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:28-34)

It was later on, when John was baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins, when Jesus appeared and insisted that John baptize him, which John reluctantly did. Following his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus began his public ministry of healing the sick and crippled, and teaching the kingdom of God.

In time, the followers of Jesus numbered larger than the followers of John, and John’s followers called this to John’s attention. John said to them: “He must increase; but I must decrease.” (John 3:30) As Jesus became more widely known and followed, John continued to preach a baptism of repentance. “But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.” (Luke 3:19,20)
In Matthew, eleven, beginning with verse two, we find out that while in prison, John asked his followers to go and ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Being a Jew, John was very familiar with the fact that the people of Israel had been waiting for centuries for God to send Israel a deliverer to free its people from the enslavement of world powers. John also knew that Israel’s waiting and longing for a deliverer was based upon God’s promise of such a deliverer, or savior.

When John’s followers asked Jesus if he was the promised savior, “Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.’” (Matthew 11:4-6)

**The Enigma**

I want to say it without delay: John the Baptist has always been an enigma to me. One reason for this is my limited knowledge of John’s personal relationship with Jesus. Although John and Jesus were kin to each other – because of the kinship between Mary (Jesus’ mother) and Elizabeth (John’s mother), there is no record to indicate that John and Jesus were ever close to each other. Although John had proclaimed Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” had identified Jesus as “the Son of God,” and had baptized Jesus, there is no record of John ever calling Jesus “Lord.” There is no indication that John was ever a follower of Jesus, or that Jesus called John to be His disciple. John simply went about preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, while Jesus went about healing the sick and crippled and teaching the kingdom of heaven. Whether John and Jesus ever saw each other after John baptized Jesus, we are not told.
It would appear that Jesus and John kept up with each other through their respective disciples. Still another reason for the enigma relates to the unusual circumstances of John’s birth, his life-style and his mission. I believe that John was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born, that his simple life-style reflected his religious asceticism, and that he was called of God to herald the coming of God’s Son into the world.

I also recall John saying that he saw the Holy Spirit descending and resting on Jesus, which convinced him that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. I further remember that John said that, while he baptized with water, Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. I am convinced that the purpose of John’s mission was to prepare the way for the promised coming of the Messiah/Savior to Israel.

I wonder about when John sent his disciples to Jesus. Was he being skeptical about Jesus truly being the promised messiah? Was he unsure about himself and his own ministry? Was he simply asking for assurance and confirmation? Or was it, perhaps, all three?

The truth was that John had faithfully proclaimed the message that God had given him to proclaim. Moreover, Jesus had praised John as “the greatest” of men. Yet, it is what Jesus also said of John – as being not as great as the least in the kingdom of heaven – that has troubled me. My dilemma comes down to one question: Was Jesus saying that John did not belong to the kingdom of heaven? I must say in all honesty, I truly do not know the answer to this question. If there is anything that might shed some light on the answer, I suggest it might be found in the meaning of “the kingdom of heaven.” What, in fact, is the kingdom of heaven?
Identifying the Kingdom Of God/Heaven

My understanding is that in Scripture, “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven” are one and the same. It is helpful to understand that “kingdom” also means “rule.”

One day, Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them to pray as John taught his disciples. Jesus said to them, “Pray then this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:9-13)

I believe that Jesus is telling His disciples to pray that God’s rule be honored, and God’s will be obeyed, on earth as in heaven. Depending upon which Gospel account is chosen, and which translation or version is preferred, there are three different locations where the kingdom, or rule, of God is found. The rule of God is found “within you,” “among you,” and “in your midst.” Looking closely at these three locations, I actually see only two: inside and outside. For me, “within” is “inside,” while both “among” and “in your midst” are “outside.” I believe that “within you,” not “outside of you,” is where the “rule” of God truly is located (if it is to be located at all).

While I will agree that some behavior may appear to have emanated from the rule of God, in fact, it might well have emanated from motivation other than the rule of God. Outward appearances can be deceiving. To the best of my ability, I know whether or not I am motivated and activated by the rule of God, as best I know and understand His rule for me. If, in all honesty, my faithfulness to God is my top priority, I know that it is so because I have chosen to make it so. Whenever I am unfaithful to God, I also know that I am the one who chose it to be so. Whether faithful or unfaithful, I make the choices in my life, and I make these choices from inside of me.
Jesus told His disciples, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness ...” (Matthew 6:33) I hear Jesus saying to me, “At all times, as my disciple, you are intentionally to pursue the rule and righteousness of God.” This means that I am to do my best to honor and follow this directive from my Lord. The truth is, there are times when following this directive is difficult enough even when I know very well what I am supposed to do. What can make it much more difficult for me is if I do not know what it is I should do. What do I do then? To whom can I turn for guidance and help?

In the last few years, I have been learning as never before that Jesus’ promise to His disciples is also for me. Jesus promised, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the father and he will give you another advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (John 14:15-21)

How will He do this? How will He reveal Himself to them? How will He reassure them of His eternal presence with Him, and they with Him? How will he provide them with His guidance and help in the daily living of their lives, and in those times of difficulty and danger, and how will they be able to perceive His revelation to them?
Revelation and Discernment

As a professing Christian, I am convinced that my old life without Christ is gone. Because of the grace of God, my new life in Christ is within me forever. Christ has done for me what I could never have done by myself. I have chosen to entrust my life, my loyalty and my love to Him.

Not only do I now belong to Him, He has promised me that He will always be with me, always ready to provide me with the guidance and help I need for any and every circumstance I encounter. It was this very promise that He made to those first Christians over two thousand years ago. I am confident that same promise still holds true for all Christians today. Day after day, benefits and blessings come to me, whether or not I acknowledge them as gifts, and whether or not I express my gratitude to Him for them.

From time to time, I also encounter difficulties and problems which challenge me beyond my ability to face them adequately, much less resolve them as I would like. At such times of struggle and uncertainty, I may remember another promise Jesus made to His disciples: “Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7,8)

I must admit that, sometimes, instead of asking for His help, I may impatiently act on my first impulse. I have later regretted this. I know what it is to become anxious and afraid, discouraged and even depressed. I also know the relief and reassurance I experience when I remember His promise not only to be with me, but also to “reveal” Himself to me. I like to think of His revelation as His communication to me.

How do I receive His communication to me? Or, to put it another way, how do I discern His revelation to me? What is discernment? According to the dictionary, discernment is,
“comprehending the obscure.” It is recognizing and identifying the distinctive and the particular. Discernment involves using all of the senses, yet without vision. I think of discernment as an inner realization. I believe that the same process applies to *spiritual* discernment. It is, in fact, an inner realization, but of a different dimension. What is revealed to me is whatever God wants to reveal to me. But, how do I discern God’s revelation to me?

Since I am convinced that God’s Holy Spirit does the revealing, I am also convinced that it is up to me to discern, or comprehend, what it is that God is revealing to me. No one can discern for me because my relationship with God is only between God and me. As I seek to discern what God is revealing to me, my relationship with God requires that I do so with reverence and respect for God. I believe that God is both sovereign and loving. I must have confidence and trust in whatever God reveals to me. For me, this means maintaining a humble and submissive openness to God. My experience has told me that God is totally free to reveal, or communicate, with me whatever, whenever, wherever and however God so chooses.

I have found it difficult, yet so important, to stay open to the free working of God’s Spirit. I must admit that God often provides me with guidance and help long before I ask for it. Many times, I ask for His guidance and help. How do I ask? My experience has taught me, over and over again, that discernment for me comes through a humble and submissive openness to God.

There are times when I am neither humble nor submissively open. Sometimes, I am also short on patience. My own self-centeredness and self-serving easily get in the way. When, by the grace of God, I am patient and consistent in my humble and submissive openness to God, He has absolutely amazed me in what comes to me, all thanks and praise be to God. My inner realization, or discernment, occurs as I put my faith and my trust in God, and God alone. So often, I have found that
The Spirit’s revelation to me was already there, just waiting for me to “ask.” I have found that there is a remarkable closeness between my “inner realization” and the “rule of God” within me.

In light of all of the above, has the enigma of John the Baptist been removed for me? The enigma still exists. Did Jesus really say that John did not belong to the kingdom of God? I still do not know the answer to this question. I am convinced that John consistently proclaimed the message that God sent him to proclaim. I am content to leave the enigma right there, and concern myself with the kingdom of God – and me.

Jesus declared the following: “... I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12); “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:12); “... I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty ...”(John 6:35); “ ... I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die ...” (John 11:25)

By the grace of God through my faith in Jesus Christ, I am confident that I belong to the kingdom of God. I know that I have intentionally chosen Jesus Christ to “rule” my life. I am enabled to do this by the “indwelling” presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that I consistently and intentionally choose to “strive first” for His rule and His righteousness. I am also confident that The Spirit sooner or later always lets me know when I have been unfaithful to Him, and I am then faced with the option of asking and seeking His forgiveness – or remaining alienated and estranged from Him. I have been blessed many times to know “within” that He has forgiven me. It is then that I feel forgiven and reassured that all is well between Him and me. Feeling reconciled and reassured
“within” me, I also feel empowered to face whatever is around and outside of me.

The Apostle Paul said, “... I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Philipians 4:13)

When all is said and done, “it’s what’s inside that counts.”

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