

John the Baptist – living with questions

My prison reminds me of the cave my mother took me to when we fled from Herod's soldiers. My father had no chance to escape. He was slain in the temple in front of the altar. I was less than a year old at the time. When I was older my mother told me the reason for Herod's anger. Wise men from the East told that a new king had been born in Israel. Herod's spies had found out about the miracle that had happened to my father and Herod assumed my father knew where the new king was hiding. When he refused to tell anything, Herod's soldiers killed him and then all the boy children in Bethlehem. My mother escaped with me.

With a joy in her eyes my mother told that one of her relatives, Mary was the mother of the coming Messiah. My mother had met Mary when she was expecting her child. The Holy Spirit had confirmed that this child was to be the one who would deliver Israel.

My mother, already an old woman when I was born, did not survive many years after the tragic loss of her husband and the trauma of hiding in the cave. Kind neighbors helped and protected us and when finally my mother died, they took me down to the community in Qumran near the Dead Sea. There I was brought up and there I learned the scriptures.

I appreciated the commitment of the people of Qumran to a life of holiness and to the study of the scriptures but I was not content with their isolation from the rest of Israel. Surely the savior God was going to send, was for the whole of Israel not just for the Sons of light as they called themselves in Qumran? When I grew older I left the community of Qumran and returned to the cave where I had first lived with my mother.

In those lonely years of study and prayer, the sense of my calling grew stronger. Before she died, my mother had told me of the miracle connected with my birth. She also told me that my father had prophesied that I would be the forerunner for the coming Messiah. The Holy Spirit confirmed this in my heart and showed me I was to fulfill the words of Isaiah 40, to be a voice shouting in the desert, prepare a way for the Lord.

My hero from the Bible was Elijah and I adopted his camel skin dress and leather belt. People asked me if I thought I was Elijah come back as the prophet Malachi had predicted. I said "No" because I could never think I could be as great a person as Elijah. Yet in my heart there burned a passion for the purity of the people of Israel. I longed that they would repent and get ready for the coming of God's anointed one, the Messiah.

A few people found their way to my cave and listened to my teaching and I baptized them there in the pool at the back of the cave, calling them to turn away from their sins. As the number increased I realized I could no longer stay in the cave but I needed a more public place, so, as I began my 30th year, I moved down to the Jordan river and began to proclaim publicly my message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Great crowds started to come to me and I baptized many.

Inside I was full of excitement as I waited for the Messiah to come and lead his people to victory. One day a man stood in front of me and introduced himself “John, I am the son of Mary, the relative of your mother Elisabeth”. I wanted to fall at his feet; I felt so unworthy. Here was the One I had been waiting for standing in front of me. But his next words astounded me “Baptize me John”. “No, Lord” I said, “You should baptize me”. But he insisted that he must identify with Israel in all its sinfulness if he was to become its savior. So I agreed and baptized him. Then as he waded out of the river and stood with hands lifted in prayer I saw the sign God had told me about. I saw the Spirit descend like a dove on him. Then I knew this was truly the Messiah the One whom God had anointed with the Spirit.

Excitedly I began to proclaim to the others what God had shown me. I told that the Messiah was God’s lamb. He was the sacrifice God had prepared for his people, just as he had promised to our father Abraham: instead of Isaac, God himself would prepare a sacrifice. I had come to understand that the efforts of the people at Qumran to achieve holiness by the works of the Law were not enough. Nor were the sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem enough. A better sacrifice was needed and God was going to provide it. Though I still could not understand how the Messiah could both be the Lamb of God and lead his people to victory.

The other truth was easier to understand. I knew the limitation of my baptism in water. I could urge people to repent and to symbolically wash away their sins and commit to a new life of holiness but I knew that the human heart is so corrupt that no water could wash it clean. Something more was needed. Thus I proclaimed what the prophet Malachi told, that the Messiah would purify his people with the Holy Spirit and with fire and make them holy on the inside.

The next day I pointed out Jesus to two of my disciples, John and Andrew. They left me and went to be with Jesus for the day. They came back, full of excitement that they had found the Messiah. Each found his brother, John took James and Andrew took Peter and they went to follow Jesus. I felt mixed feelings. It was wonderful they shared my belief that Jesus was the Messiah but hard to lose my own followers who had become dear to me in recent months.

I waited for Jesus to make an announcement about setting up his new Kingdom. Indeed he did preach that the kingdom was coming but he did not try to gather an army. He just continued calling people to repentance like I had done. His disciples baptized those who repented. Then he and his disciples went off north to Galilee. And that was the last time I saw him.

I was puzzled by Jesus actions but since I had no other clear guidance from God I carried on preaching and baptizing. One thing that really stirred up anger in me was the conduct of Herod Antipas the son of Herod who had killed my father. Herod Antipas had married his brother’s wife. It seemed terrible to me that a leader of the people should behave so clearly against the Law of Moses and I spoke out against him. Not many days later soldiers came and took me and I ended up in the prison in Herod’s castle.

The days were long and dark. Yes, I did have the chance to speak face to face with Herod and there was a struggle going on in his conscience. But all the time I was

waiting for news of the new King setting up his kingdom. As the months passed and nothing happened I started to wonder, had I been wrong in thinking Jesus was the Messiah? I sent some of my remaining faithful disciples to ask him if he was the Messiah. His response was to heal people and deliver them from demons. I had to content myself that his way of doing things was not what I had expected. So I am still waiting for him to start the kingdom, and to set me free. That hope keeps me going in this dark prison.

I have heard that Herod is having a big party in the castle today. I see my jailer coming with a large dish. Maybe he is bringing something from the party for me to eat....

Prayer after the sermon

John was willing to prepare the way for some one else. Are we working to raise up new leaders and creating space for others to move into ministry?

John had a passion to point others to Jesus, do we?

John saw Jesus as God's solution to the problem of sin in two ways:

- firstly as the sacrifice to pay the price for sin
- secondly giving the Holy Spirit to help repentant people to live a holy life.

Is there someone here who has not yet trusted Jesus to be his savior. Won't you do it now?

Is there someone here struggling with sin who has not trusted the Holy Spirit to help him? Won't you do that now?

John did not really understand what Jesus was doing. Have God's actions or lack of actions been causing problems for you. Will you like John trust him that he knows what he is doing and his way is best?

If you would like more personal prayer for these matters come to the front at the end of the service and we will pray with you.

Explanation

In 1999 a cave was discovered in the Judean hills. The evidence suggests that this was the place where John lived and started baptizing. This is described in the book "The Cave of John the Baptist" by Shimon Gibson (Arrow Books 2005).

According to tradition, John's father Zechariah was killed in the temple by Herod's soldiers who were looking for the baby Jesus. His mother Elizabeth escaped to a cave in the desert with John. She died when John was seven and a half.

Scholars have speculated that John spent time in Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were later hidden and discovered in 1948 and after. However, from the New Testament it is clear that John must have left later on because his ministry did not fit within the limits of the Qumran community. The rest of what I told is from the Bible account itself.