

Some Thoughts on John the Baptist

So we know that John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, and only six months older than Jesus. And the families were close, because Mary had visited Elizabeth, John's mother, when they were both pregnant.¹

So I think it is safe to assume that John and Jesus grew up knowing each other, seeing each other, spending some time together. As John grew in his own zeal for God, and his very specific call from God, he began to move in his ministry. He was a strong voice, calling people of Israel to repent of their sin and prepare for the coming 'Messiah', the Savior. He himself said that this is what God had called him to preach, and what he could expect to see. Look at what John said to the people after he had baptized Jesus, and seen the Holy Spirit come on Jesus in the form of a dove:

'I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One.' (John 1:32-34)

So Jesus grew up from childhood alongside John, and yet John ***'did not know him'*** as the Messiah. John only recognized that Jesus was the 'Chosen One', the 'Savior', the moment John baptized him and saw the Spirit come down on Jesus in the form of a dove.

John had not known the true, the full identity of Jesus until late in John's life, and late in Jesus' life. In some regards John did not even know his *own* true and full identity in God till possibly the very end of life, or maybe not even till *after* he had died. You see, when John was asked if he was Elijah-to-come (*referencing the Scripture in Malachi 4:5-6, when the people had been told that Elijah would come again before the Savior appeared*), John said, ***'No'***. John at this point said he was simply a voice, a herald, someone to come in advance of the Savior. to tell people to repent, in order to prepare the way for the Savior.

Two things on this: First, John said he was *not* the 'Elijah-to-come', but Jesus, later on near John's death, said that John *was* the Elijah-to-come. (Matthew 11:6) John was not Elijah reincarnated, but he *was* the 'Elijah-to-come' that God had promised, foretold. He came in the same spirit of zeal, of integrity, calling Israel to repent, to ***'grieve evil'***², to prepare for God. So the first point is that John did not even know his full identity in God – and we don't either! We won't until we see Jesus face-to-face, and he gives us that 'new name'. (Revelation 2:17)

Secondly – and this is also 'key' for us in our identity journey – John identified himself by what he was called to 'do'. When he was asked *who* he was, and therefore what spiritual authority he had to be preaching repentance and baptizing, John said this: ***'I am not the Prophet, I am not the Messiah, I am not Elijah... I am a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'*** (vs.23)

The opening of this chapter (John 1) the author writes about John the Baptist this truth: ***'John was sent from God to testify about the 'true light'. John the Baptist was not himself the 'light'; he came only as a witness to the light.'*** (vs.6-9)

In summary: John had a very significant identity in God, but John was not too caught up in his own

¹ All of this can be found in Luke chapter 1

² Ezekiel 9:4

identity. What John was most concerned about was what God had called him to do. He was clear about *this* – and that was all he really needed clarity on. His true and complete spiritual identity was known to God, and God held it secure. If John was faithful in his calling, and stayed steady on his course, he would come into full knowledge one day of his identity – and reward – in God. And so will you and I! (*read the full chapter of 1 Corinthians 3, and also Revelation 2:17*)

Towards the end of John's ministry and life, he was in prison under Herod. He challenged Herod in his immoral, personal life. (*Just interesting to note here, that John had 'issue' with the personal life choices of a secular, political leader.*) John was in prison, when the Savior he had professed far and wide was supposed to be a **'chain breaker'**. It was Jesus himself that had read from the scroll of Isaiah, claiming: **'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor... and to set captives free.'** (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61) But John was *not* set free, and was facing execution.

So John sends messengers to Jesus asking (in public), **'Are you the One, or should we expect another?'** (Matthew 11:2-3) This is a tense situation! The highest profile 'voice' that had claimed Jesus to be the One, was now questioning whether that was true. At this moment, Jesus sends back reassuring word to John. But he goes one step further. Jesus turns to the people and says that there has been no greater man born to woman than John (vs.11) and that John was, in fact, the Elijah-to-come. (vs.14) High praise from Jesus in the face of doubt, maybe even in the face of a sense of betrayal?

John's wavering at the end of the road – wavering in faith – did not offend Jesus. He doubted Jesus, but Jesus did not doubt him. John's discouragement and doubting came from dark roads he had walked by being faithful to Jesus; John's wavering in faith had not come from wandering from the faith. John was exhausted from faithfulness – as had been Elijah, read 1 Kings 17-19. Elijah, too, had asked God for a break! He said, **'I can't take it anymore!'** (1 Kings 19:4) And God met him here, raised up help (Jehu, Elisha). Elijah was held in high regard by God, and even after Elijah died, together with only Moses, he appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Matthew 17)

Our confidence is not in *our* strong and perfect faith in Jesus. Our confidence is in *his* hold on us. We falter, we fall, and **'underneath are the everlasting arms.'** (Deuteronomy 33:27b) Look carefully at this Scripture, and rest in it. The real 'knowing' is God's knowing of us, not us of him. He is faithful!

'God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.' (2 Timothy 2:19)