

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

In my previous article from John 1:19-28, we pondered the importance of our witness to Jesus Christ by looking at the witness of John the Baptist. We saw last time that, when asked by the Jewish leaders “Who are you?” John makes a strong denial saying, “I am not the Christ.” Let’s move on now from strong denial to: *Servant of Christ*.

John now declares in 1:23, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” These words come from Isaiah Chapter 40, but this is only a partial rendering of what’s said in Isaiah’s prophecy. “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Notice how this is to be done: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

The original prophecy pertained to the returning of the children of Israel from exile. The picture is one of preparing the wilderness roads for some important dignitary or even king. The imagery is given of moving away any obstacles that would hinder his travel to the people. In this case, John’s witness is to be a voice crying out for people to get ready for the Messiah that the prophets had foretold. The prophecy of Isaiah is one of bringing words of comfort to people who are distressed. John is fulfilling the role of a herald or a “voice.” He is not the Word, but the Word is here. John is a forerunner, setting the stage for Jesus’ public ministry. We too have a necessary role of clearing away obstacles in preparing hearts to hear about Jesus. We do this in a very important and primary way with our covenant children. In the home and in the church, we take the opportunities given to us by “voice” and by example to serve and love our covenant children. We certainly have a responsibility outside the home and the church with other relationships as we seek to be salt and light, but we must never overlook or marginalize—in any way — our covenant children as we seek to point them to Jesus.

We move on now to this group of Jewish dignitaries questioning John again in Verse 24: “Then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” Interestingly, some scholars note that proselyte baptism had been taking place since the time of the intertestamental period. The Jewish people — in addition to requiring male circumcision—had begun to baptize Gentile converts, including the men as well as the women and children. This was to be a sign of cleansing of the pollution that was part of the Gentile world prior to their being allowed into the Jewish covenant community. But the Jewish people themselves had never been required to receive baptism. After all, they were God’s chosen people. But when we come to the New Testament gospels, John is baptizing not Gentiles but Jewish people; this is unheard of! Although it’s true that some believed that there would be baptism prior to the coming of the Messiah (Ez. 36:25; Zech. 13:1), this group from Jerusalem seemed unconvinced and wanted

proof to take back to the Jewish leaders about who John was. Otherwise, they believed, he had no business baptizing anyone, much less Jewish people.

This takes us to our final point. Along with strong denial and servant of Christ, John now gives us a clear picture of humility. Let's look at John's: ***Self-Abasement***.

"I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." John is not taking away from the importance of his baptism, but, in a way that the Jewish dignitaries would have understood, he is giving a clear statement of utmost humility or self-abasement. Briefly, scholars note that it was generally accepted that the disciples of a teacher would perform many services on their behalf. But the one thing that they would never do is to stoop down and loosen the straps of the shoes of their teacher. This was always seen as the task of the lowliest servant.

In one ancient book of instructions that pertain to Jewish Rabbi's we find these words: "Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong." One New Testament scholar has written: "John selects the very task that the (the rabbis) say is too menial for any disciple and declares himself unworthy to perform it." This is the essence of humility and self-abasement on display. I am not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of my Lord's sandal. Although John the Baptist was unique and had a special ministry, what can we learn from John's example as a witness to Jesus Christ?

Strong Denial: We want to strive, by grace, to be the type of person who by his life and example says in effect, "Jesus is the Savior of my life — not me! "I am not the Christ!" I seek in every way to avoid idols in my life — whether the idol of self, family, job or anything that hinders a lifetime of worship to Jesus. To worship Christ is to make a strong denial toward any idol worship: I am not the priority of my life; my family, ultimately, is not the priority of my life; my job is not the priority of my life; Jesus Christ is my priority and my Savior, not me! Everything and every person must rightfully take its place behind my love for and worship of my Savior. My life as well as the life of my family and other relationships will be better because of it.

Servant of Christ: Just like John, who was "a voice crying in the wilderness," I am committed, by grace, to spend my life pointing my children, grandchildren, covenant children and anyone in every relationship to Jesus Christ by my words and my service to Christ. I will seek to make a straight path and level ground, not placing any obstacle in the way of pointing others to Jesus. Flowing out of that is:

Self-Abasement: Our desire should be to live our lives with an attitude of humility before God. I will not be looking for only the highest places of service. I will serve wherever needed. There's not an area of service that I will be unwilling to perform that Jesus — by his Word and through His church — asks of me and grants me the ability and opportunity to perform. May God continue to help all Christians to see how important it is to be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ in Word and deed.

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