

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS

Today, as something a little different, I thought I'd like to introduce you to one of my oldest and dearest friends. We met, I think, back in 1973 or 74, went to the same home church, enjoyed the same youth group, headed off to college in Michigan together, graduated on the same day, headed to the seminary together, stood up in each other's weddings, were present for each other's ordinations and installations, and have shared countless other experiences as we have maintained our friendship. Would you please welcome Pastor Jeff Scheich.

JEFF: Good morning, and welcome to you from my wife, Melinda, who also grew up with your Pastor in the Philadelphia area, from the good people at Christ Lutheran Church in Lincoln NE and, of course, from me. As your pastor said, we did grow up together and have been best friends for many years. And yet, as similar as we are in priorities and values, as close as we are as friends, in practicality we are, in many ways, very different.

PHIL: Jeff serves a very large, mega-congregation that has multiple sites. They have a parochial school and a very large staff including 8 rostered pastors. You guys here at Beautiful Savior, on the other hand, are ... stuck with me. But we do have Dr. Otto, Dr. Jastram, Pastor Mosemann and Pastor Corniels sitting among us. Still, big versus smaller. Very different.

JEFF: Phil is kinda fond of cold weather. He vicared in Alaska and loves the mountains and scenic northern parks. In winter I know he is proud of his snowblowing skills and willingness to sit at Lambeau Field in 5 degrees.

PHIL: Jeff loves the warmth. He did his vicarage in Florida and often chooses to travel to places that are warm and sunny. He and Melinda are beach people, Disneyworld people, and summer people. In June and July I know he is proud to relax on his beautiful deck and barbecue some food on the grill.

JEFF: I would consider myself to be an organized person who likes a plan way ahead of time.

PHIL: And I... less so. I like spontaneity, rolling-with-the-punches.

JEFF: But Phil is very creative. A quality I admire in him.

PHIL: And Jeff is very passionate. A quality I admire in him.

JEFF: Phil's congregations have been more traditional.

PHIL: Jeff's congregations have loved the more contemporary Christian music.

JEFF: Phil has hair.

PHIL: Jeff has a beard.

JEFF: But we both root for the Philadelphia Eagles

PHIL: At least this past season. And we both love the Rocky movies 1-4, Cheesesteaks, Wawa, Tastykakes, and Wooder Ice.

JEFF: Indisputably some of the finest treats the world has ever known. Although Rocky 5 and the others that followed, not so much.

PHIL: Yes, very disappointing. But enough about us. These good folks didn't come here to listen to our stories. They came here to be fed with the word of God.

The reason I brought Pastor Scheich up here this morning is that I thought it might be interesting for you to hear a dialog about the two men we consider today: Jesus and John the Baptist using a dialog format with Jeff representing John the Baptist over there and myself speaking of our Lord Jesus over here. I hope, when we're done, you'll have a better understanding of the two as you consider their similarities, their differences, their roles and attitudes, and maybe find some meaning as it relates to your walk of faith. So let's begin:

PROPHECY

JEFF: John the Baptist's work was prophesied from of old. In Isaiah 40, nearly 800 years before John's birth, we read of a future preparing prophet who will be called to announce the imminent arrival of the Messiah. This prophet, Isaiah declares, will help ready believers for the Savior by calling them to lives of repentance and humility. As he puts it,

"A voice of one calling, 'prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."

We are also told that John would come in the spirit of Elijah and that he would turn the "hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers." That is, that he would make plain the brokenness of mankind and call people back into relationship their God (through the Messiah) and with their families.

PHIL: Jesus was also prophesied from of old. Over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament declare that One would come who would defeat the power of Satan by being in very nature God, but by humbling Himself to be crucified as a sinner. And Jesus was that Messiah – King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and yet the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep.

If John came to rototill the hard soil of the hearts of God's people by dredging up their sin and their guilt, Jesus came to bring the seed of God's Grace to be planted in the tilled soil. He came to let all know that God would make provision for their sin and that He Himself would pay the price.

PURPOSE

JEFF: John the Baptist was well aware that his role was not to be the Main Event but instead to POINT PEOPLE to the Main Event. That is, his job as preparing prophet was to direct people to Jesus, not to become some superstar himself. The book of the Apostle John makes this clear as it discusses John the Baptist. It says,

“now this was John's testimony when the Jews sent priests to ask him who he was. He confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ (and said) ‘I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. The reason I came baptizing with water was that He might be revealed to Israel. The one who comes from above is above all – the one who belongs to the earth belongs to the earth. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.”

No doubt John learned about Jesus' identity from his own mother, Elizabeth. She was given the news, shortly after John's conception, that her relative, the Virgin Mary, was also giving birth to a child – a child who was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit. When Mary visited Elizabeth prior to Jesus' birth, John the Baptist literally leaped for joy in the womb of his mother. And Elizabeth sang praise to God for fulfilling His promises.

PHIL: Jesus, on the other hand, understood very early on that He had come for the express purpose of bringing rescue and deliverance to God's people. He said it clearly to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

So Jesus, in obedience to His Father and in love for us, humbled Himself and became one of us. And after His three-year ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, He goes to the cross as our substitute.

THE PLAN UNFOLDS

JEFF: After John and Jesus were born, it doesn't seem they had many encounters. John grew up in one area of the country, in Judea, while Jesus grew up in Galilee, pretty far north of John. You don't get the sense that they were childhood pals sharing regular conversations or insights. Nevertheless, there was one encounter that really stands out.

John, having begun his ministry, had gotten a reputation for baptizing people unto repentance. Many individuals came to rededicate themselves to God by turning away from their sins and trusting in God's mercy to rescue them. As their bodies went under the water, it symbolized the drowning of the old, sinful ways, and the new life that would be found in connection to God through His Promised One.

PHIL: One day, onto the shore of the Jordan comes the Lord Jesus. And it becomes plain, to John, that Jesus wants to be baptized.

JEFF: John was shocked, stunned – stupefied. “I need to be baptized by you” he said to Jesus, “not you by me.” John knew that his baptism called for people to repent of their sins; and that the Lord Jesus didn't have any sins to repent of. So he couldn't conceive of the fact that there was any good reason for the Messiah to be baptized.

PHIL: But Jesus makes it clear that He came to identify with us – to talk in our shoes and to bear the punishment for our sins. So, in a sense, in His baptism, He becomes the greatest sinner of all time as He steps into the water fully intending to carry all the sins of the whole world for all of time.

JEFF: When Jesus comes up out of the water, John sees a dove come down upon him, and then a voice from heaven cries out: “This is my Son, whom I love, with Him I am well-pleased.” At that moment, John realizes that it was time for him to step out of the limelight and to welcome the Savior of the World to take center stage.

Without hesitation, he tells his disciples that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He urges them to follow Jesus.

PHIL: And when these and other disciples DO follow Jesus they find, in Him, what they would expect from God: incredible miracles, supernatural healings, demons cast out, radical teachings,

meaningful preaching, -- even resurrections from death. In every way He showed Himself to be the Son of God – God in the flesh.

The only thing they couldn't fully digest was why Jesus talked about suffering, crucifixion and death. I guess they didn't fully comprehend what John meant when he called Jesus, "the Lamb of God." This meant sacrifice, this meant the shedding of blood, this meant being our substitute, carrying our sin, dying our death. But this Lamb would conquer the Devil and sin and death. He would rise up from the slaughter and bring life to all who believe on Him.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN

PHIL: So what can we learn from these two for our own personal walk with God? How will their stories change our lives?

JEFF: From John we learn at least two important truths:

1) Our Holy God takes sin seriously and wants us to repent. Iniquity is not to be embraced, cherished, or savored. It is an abomination to God that, left unchecked, can lead to a deadly spiritual grave. Obedience is not an option. Faithfulness is not a choice. Holiness is God's demand. So consider that dark corner of your life that you know is there but you hide under a veneer of pretend pretenses. That's serious business.

So that's the first thing John teaches us. AND then

2) If we are going to have any rescue from #1, we are going to have to look outside ourselves. We will need divine intervention, compassionate grace, unconditional love. The separation between us and God is too great. We will have to look for Another to win our place with the Creator.

PHIL: And in Jesus, of course, we see God's great answer to our quandary. God-in-the-flesh opens up His hands to us. Omnipotent and Omniscient Lord, comes into our world to know and bear our sin and pain. On the cross He dies our death. In the crucifixion He conquers the power of sin and Satan. And finally, at the empty tomb He puts the final touch on our eternal victory.

But God is no dictator. Though He has all power, He will never force us to believe in Him; instead, He will come gently, lovingly, compassionately.

JEFF: When John the Baptist spent his last days in prison, he smiled as he heard from Jesus that Jesus, was “making the blind see, the deaf hear, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” John knew that God had been faithful, and he, John, had done well by pointing everyone to Jesus as the Lamb of God.

PHIL: And that is our role too. Sometimes people talk about the term ‘Christian’ as a word that means “little Christs” and they declare that we are called to be like Jesus. “Little Christs: Christians.”

JEFF: But maybe we are actually called to be more called to be like John: never focused on ourselves and never calling attention to what we have or do. But rather letting others know that Jesus alone is the Way the Truth and the Life, and that He came that we might have life and have it abundantly.

PHIL: And, as John fulfilled that role, Jesus said of him: “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” In other words, we are ALL called to live out our lives in humble service to our Savior. “Jesus must increase, and we must decrease.

Well, thanks Pastor Scheich, for helping me with this message today. I think it might actually be the first time we’ve shared the word of God together in a formal way.

JEFF: I think you’re probably right about that. Maybe we’ll have to do it again. We could make sequels, like the Rocky movies. John and Jesus 2, John and Jesus 3.

PHIL: Yes, and maybe we could even add a boxing component and branch out to other Bible characters: Samson and Jesus. David and Jesus.

JEFF: Or maybe I’ll just say, blessings to you, Pastor Phil, and to all of you at Beautiful Savior as you serve our Lord together. May Jesus always increase and we always decrease.

PHIL: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.