

SM002 – The Voice from Heaven

The prophet John, the holy man in the wilderness who had heard the word of God and began proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand, searched the crowd. Multitudes had come to hear him preach his message of repentance. Every class in society – from the peasants to the religious leaders – had come, had listened, had talked with him, and sometimes argued. Hundreds, thousands had filled his gaze as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom.

But John's mission was not to the crowds only. His mission was also a search for one man, for a special man, and his eyes scanned the crowd every day and he wondered when this one man would step forward.

John had talked about him on many occasions. "One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie His sandals and remove them from His feet. He is the one for whom we all wait. He is the Messiah. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

It was important that John say this often. The crowds were so excited over him and his mission that he had to make sure they didn't think of him as the Chosen One. It had been over 400 years since the people of God had heard the voice of a real prophet. And now one stood before them, in flesh and blood, and dressed like Elijah. It was understandable that the people would be so excited and would even wonder if he was the Messiah.

But many months before, when God had first spoken to John in the wilderness telling him to preach repentance to the people, God also told him this:

"John, I am sending you to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. You must watch for Him. Here is how you will know him. A man will step forth from the crowd. When you baptize him, you will see heaven open and the Spirit of God descending from heaven upon Him and remaining upon Him. He will be the One. You will baptize in water, but he will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit.

John had been baptizing for weeks, for months, and many times he looked to the sky to see if it would open and if the Spirit would come upon the one that he was baptizing. But the sign did not come. How long would it take?

And then, one day, after a long day of preaching and baptizing, when it seemed his work for that day was done, a man stepped out of the crowd and waded into the abundant waters of the Jordan River.

"What is your name?" John asked.

"I am Jesus ... of Nazareth, of the house of Joseph and Mary."

"Jesus ... of Nazareth? Your mother is Mary, my mother Elizabeth's cousin? My mother told me stories, and I often wondered, but ...

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“Yes,” Jesus said as He smiled at John. “And the stories you have heard are true. They are as true as yours for I know about your family and your birth. What your mother told you is true.”

John had heard it all when his mother Elizabeth had told him stories of his own birth, how the angel had appeared to his father, Zacharias, in the temple and announced that he would be born and that beyond all hope God had given a child to Zacharias and Elizabeth in their old age. Elizabeth loved telling him that story.

But Elizabeth had also told him stories of when her cousin, Mary, came to visit and told her the wonderful news that a special boy was in her womb as well! But Elizabeth did not need Mary to tell her that for when Mary entered the room, John had leaped in her womb for joy over the child Mary was carrying. The child that Mary was carrying was a child placed in her womb by the power of God and the promise the angel told Mary was that he would restore the kingdom of God in Israel and the world. Elizabeth loved telling that to John when he was a boy.

And now here was this child, a grown man like John, standing before John in the waters of the Jordan and a thrill was going through his heart again, just like the thrill that he experienced when he was in his mother’s womb 30 years before. Could he be the one?

“Jesus ... are you ...” John started to ask, but Jesus cut him off.

“Baptize me John.”

A sense of unworthiness swept over John. He swallowed hard and remembered the words he had been saying to the people for months, that the Promised One would be so glorious that John, this mighty prophet, would not be worthy to perform even a lowly task of taking the sandals off the feet of the Messiah.

And now John was feeling exactly this way toward the one who stood before him – completely unworthy, and he said, “But ... I feel so ... unworthy. I ... feel like you should baptize me.”

“Baptize me John,” Jesus said with a slight laughter in his voice.

“Jesus, I need you to baptize me.”

“No, John. You must baptize me. This is the way that we will fulfill the righteous plan of God.”

Fulfilling the plan of God. That’s what all the preaching and baptizing was about. It was about fulfilling the righteous plan of God for the world. That’s why God sent John. That’s why Jesus now stepped forward.

But what did that mean, “*in this way* the righteous plan of God will be fulfilled?” What was *the way* God’s plan would be fulfilled? Why did the sinless Jesus insist on being baptized like a common sinner? Jesus was a holy man. He was without sin. The greatest of the prophets, John, bowed in His presence.

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Jesus was speaking a powerful truth that everyone would need to know: the way that God would walk to reinstate His kingdom on the earth would be the way of humility.

All of God's people believed that God's righteous kingdom was returning to our troubled world. All of God's people believed that His covenant promises to Abraham and to Israel would one day come to pass. But how would it happen? What method would God use?

In his baptism, in his first words, Jesus showed the method that God would use, the way that the Messiah would take. It would not be a path of glory and power, but a path of humility and identifying with sinful people that God loved.

It was fitting that Jesus would begin His ministry by humbling himself in the waters of baptism for the way that He started His ministry would also be the way He would continue His ministry and the way he would end His ministry upon the cross of humility and weakness where he would bear the sins of the world.

It was time for the world of prideful men to embrace the way of humility before God. And so He who knew no sin set the course for His life. He would enter into the world of sinners and bear their sin, first in a symbolic act of baptism, and three years later in the real pain of the cross when he would enter the deep waters of suffering where the sins of the world would engulf him.

"Baptize me John, for in this way we will bring in the righteous plan of God. In this way we will bring in the kingdom."

What could John do? He had no choice! And though not fully understanding all that Jesus meant, yet knowing in his heart that Jesus was right, he placed him beneath the waters and lifted him back up.

Then, the sign that John had been waiting to see unfolded before him and a voice resounded for all to hear, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

John lifted his eyes to heaven, in the direction of the voice that had spoken, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God coming down upon Jesus, like a dove, and settling upon Him. There the Spirit of God remained, just as the voice from heaven had told him many months before, "When you see the Spirit of God descending upon Him and remaining, this is the One who gives the Holy Spirit to His people."

This is everything John had waited for. The moment had arrived. The Messiah was before Him. And John stood silent as Jesus turned, walked out of the waters of the Jordan and headed deep into the wilderness of Judea.

Interlude

When God had revealed to John the sign by which the Messiah would be known, the Spirit of God coming upon him and remaining upon him, he did not tell John that he would also speak important

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words on that day. What did God say when Jesus was baptized? “This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

It is very important that we understand what God was not saying.

1. First, to any Muslim friends who may be listening, I want to make sure you understand that when God in heaven called Jesus His Son, He was not saying that Jesus was his physical offspring, as if God had impregnated Mary. Such an idea is repugnant to followers of Jesus, is nowhere taught in the Bible, and has never been a teaching of his followers. This is the stuff of pagan mythology and not the story that has been passed on for us to hear.
2. Second, to my Christian friends, I want to make sure you understand that when God in heaven called Jesus His Son, He was not saying, “This is the Second Person of the Trinity.” I am not denying the clear biblical teaching of the triune God or of the deity of Christ. But I am saying that this would have made no sense to John or anyone at this moment. We must not read our later Christian theology into this event. Instead, we must listen to what this voice meant to a Jewish audience steeped in the prophecies of the coming king.

To understand the voice from heaven, we need to realize that God was quoting Scripture. When He said, “This is my Beloved Son,” he was quoting from the prophecy of Psalm 2, a psalm of the coming king. When he said, “in whom I am well-pleased,” he was quoting from the prophecy of Isaiah 42, a passage of God’s Servant who would do God’s will.

Psalm 2 consists of 12 verses broken into four parts of three verses each. I hope you will look at it as I explain it to you. The first three verses tell of the rebellion of the prideful kings of the earth. We have heard about them in our first story – the story of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, among whom one of the worst was Antiochus Epiphanes IV who brought untold suffering to the people of God. By the time the two miracle children, John and Jesus were born, the Roman empire was in charge of the people of God and their land and Caesar was claiming to be God. The kings of the earth were indeed raging against the Lord. Here is how the psalm put it:

- ¹ Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
- ² The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
- ³ “Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”

The second set of three verses tells about God’s response to the rebellious kings of the earth. He is not afraid of them. The psalm says “He who sits in the heavens laughs.” Then, God speaks to these kings and tells them that He has installed the true king on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Here is what he says:

- ⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.

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- ⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
⁶ “I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”

The third section of Psalm 2, verses 7-9, tells us about this king. We have in this section a conversation between God and the king the God enthrones. Listen closely and you will hear some familiar words.

- 7 The king proclaims God’s decree: “God said to me, ‘You are my son.
Today I have become your Father.
8 Only ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
the whole earth as your possession.
9 You will break them with an iron rod
and smash them like clay pots.’”

Did you catch the part that we heard when Jesus was baptized? The voice from heaven was quoting from Psalm 2:7 which says “You are my son and today I have become your father.”

In ancient Israel, the king was considered the son of God. On the day that he took over the leadership of Israel, he was considered to be adopted by God into God’s family and was recognized as a special son of God. As a son of God he was expected to rule the people in God’s place and to carry out justice and righteousness in the land. He was to be an example to the rest of the kings of the earth who were rebelling against God. He was to show them how a true son of God lived and acted on the earth.

When John baptized Jesus, God in heaven was saying, “This is the Son of God that Psalm 2 talked about. This is the true king of Israel and the world. This is the One who is destined to rule the whole world. This is the one that all the kings of the earth must submit to. This is My king that I have placed upon Mt. Zion in Israel” and the psalm finishes with an appeal for all the kings of the earth to stop their rebellion and to submit to God’s king.

Thus, the term, Son of God, in Jesus’ baptism meant that God was identifying Jesus as the true king, the true lord of the world and that all should submit to him.

But the voice did not stop there! The voice from heaven said something else. Listen again to the story.

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

In whom I am well-pleased. God was well-pleased with Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had not yet performed one miracle or given one teaching. But God was well pleased in how He had lived up to this moment. Even though Jesus knew His divine origin, that He had come from heaven, He humbly and quietly lived a life of a simple carpenter in Nazareth. He had lived obediently to His mother Mary and to Joseph. He had been an example to all in his home and in his village so that all spoke well of Him. Yes, God was

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well-pleased with Him and God was also quoting from another passage in Scripture. He was quoting from Isaiah 42. Here is what the first verse says:

¹ “Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations.

Did you catch the phrase? He is the One in whom God delights. He is the One in whom God is well-pleased.

This section of Isaiah, is one that many people call “The Suffering Servant.” In many places in this part of Isaiah, we find God speaking about a special person who will come as a servant to mankind. The kings of the earth were just the opposite. They were rebels. They wanted to be in control. They wanted to do their will and not serve God’s will. But the prophecy of Isaiah tells us of a different kind of king, a king who serves God’s will and who serves God’s people with justice and mercy.

In Jesus’ baptism God brought these two prophecies together. One prophecy talked about kingship. That is Psalm 2. The other prophecy talked about servanthood. That is Isaiah 42. And He has put them together and said both of them are true in the life of this One man who was just baptized in the Jordan River.

By doing this, God is saying that the path to restoring the kingdom of God on earth is a path of Servanthood. The kingdom of God will not come by military might. The kingdom of God will not present itself by political power. The kingdom of God comes through one who presents himself as a servant of God and a servant to mankind. He is filled with the Spirit of God and he brings forth justice to the nations.

And this is why Jesus said to John,

“John, you must baptize me. You must let me take this path of humility for in this way we will fulfill the plan of God to restore the kingdom of God to earth. Kingship comes through being a servant and through being humble.”

John may not have comprehended all that we know after reading the stories and thinking about them for so long. But one thing he did know, the Chosen One had come. The Messiah had come and he was Jesus of Nazareth! And now, the purpose for John’s ministry was fulfilled. The long years of waiting in the wilderness and seeking for God, the long days and weeks and months of preaching and baptizing had come to their climax for God had revealed who it is that would bring the kingdom of God to earth and how the kingdom would come.

John would continue his ministry for a while longer. We can be sure he preached with renewed fervor and energy, with renewed joy and faith.

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“Repent,” he said, “for the kingdom is at hand. I have told you that One is coming who is mightier than I and who has a rank far greater than I for He existed before me. He has come. I have seen him. He is among us. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make a straight path for him. Fill up every valley and level every mountain and hill. Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads. Everyone will see the saving power of God.”

John watched as Jesus left the waters of the Jordan. Without saying another word Jesus walked away. But he didn't walk in the direction of Jerusalem, the city where King David had reigned. Nor, did he walk back to his home town of Nazareth. He walked deeper into the wilderness. John watched as the figure grew smaller and then disappeared from sight.

Where was Jesus going? Why was he leaving the people? Why was he entering a more desolate part of this dangerous wilderness?

These are all important questions, and as much as I would like to answer them now, we must wait for another day and another Story of the Master.