

THE LAST HOURS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

“There is a man from the desert with naps in his head, the sand that he walked was also his bed, the words that he spoke made the people assume there wasn’t too much left in the upper room, with skins on his back and hair on his face, they thought he was strange by the locusts he ate, you see the pharisees tripped when they heard him speak till the king took the head of this Jesus Freak” DC Talk

How often do we consider the struggles of taking up our cross to follow Jesus? How often do we consider true struggles at all? During this time of Coronavirus scare (as well as other times actually) I am reminded that we are unaware of what it truly means to struggle. Any time adversity comes around we act as if there wasn’t adversity yesterday. As if everything was kosher leading up to whatever struggle or setback we are currently facing. We have grown to be such an enriched and spoiled people that we practically make up struggles to face so that we have something to complain about. We demand a free ride to institutions of higher learning while young girls in Afghanistan say “that’s cute, I’m banned from entering a school house at all and will never know the joy of a drivers license that would get me there even if I could”. We demand a “living wage” of \$15 per hour while a handful of children in Africa can’t tell us what money looks like while they live their life in slavery and servitude waiting for the next U.N. shipment of food and toiletries to arrive. Then there are those that choose a way of life that befuddles us, people like those in the wilderness of the Amazon who shun civilization. Maybe it is because they have no desire to become as self-involved and pretentious as us. Then, we have those select few who have a life of privilege and comfort but choose to step away from it all, people like John the Baptist. His dad Zacharias was a priest, he and his wife Elizabeth, both of the lineage of Aaron, were righteous before the Lord and I do not know this for certain but I suppose they had a decent life. While Mary was expecting with Jesus she went to visit her relative Elizabeth who likely had a home and resources to call upon, which is possibly why she went to visit her. The most detailed account is given in the book of Luke, but he is mentioned in all four gospels, and they do not give these sorts of details, I simply get that impression. We are given even less information concerning his youth than we are Jesus but I suppose he became well versed in Old Testament scripture, being raised as a preachers kid and eventually becoming a preacher himself. We do not know at what age he left home, we do know that he was approximately the same age as Jesus, roughly 30 years old when he baptized Him in the Jordan prior to being beheaded by King Herod at the behest of his stepdaughter Salome. We know from Biblical accounts that he was approximately six months older than Jesus, 33-34 years of age at the time of his death. The following is my dramatized account, of the last hours of John the Baptist in the prison of the Machaerus fortress located due east of the Dead Sea, just south of the mouth of the Jordan.

Imagine if you will, a dingy, rat infested jail cell built underneath a fortress on top of a hill, just south of the mouth of the Jordan river, overlooking the Dead Sea. The year is 33 A.D., there is a single one foot by one foot window overlooking dirt on the south side of the hill so that you cannot even enjoy the vision of the body of water to the north and inside this desolate bundle of brick and mortar is a man foretold by the prophets Malachi and Isaiah. A man so important that his birth was announced by the angel Gabriel and he was compared to the likes of the prophet Elijah who was so righteous that he was able to avoid death and enter Heaven on a flaming chariot. This man is John, son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, derived from the tribe of Aaron. The voice of God came to him in the wilderness and he began to preach and baptize the willing for repentance and forgiveness of sins, informing them that one day a Savior would come whose baptism would offer the gift of the Holy Spirit. This was a man bold enough to condemn the Pharisees to their faces, calling them a brood of vipers for the glory they seek from the masses rather than leading the masses to the glory of God. He was not concerned with the influence of the priests, only the influence of God. He had the good fortune of fulfilling Isaiah's scripture by baptizing his relative Jesus in the Jordan and watching a dove descend with the heavens opening as God proclaims his pride in His Son. Counseling King Herod concerning the God of Abraham would lead to his downfall, because once he instructed the king that it was not scripturally sound to marry your brothers wife he was thrown in prison for disrespecting the king.

Once Herod learned of his preaching and humble lifestyle, John was elated that the king sought his counsel concerning the Lord. This was John's opportunity to reach beyond Galilee and see God's word reach the rest of the world with the king as the outlet. Now, here he is, John the Baptist, living his final days in a cold, infested prison cell with criminals. It is possible that Herod does not want him here, it is likely that he respects John, but the king must save face and punish anyone who does not tickle his ears and who might tell him that he is morally unsound. We aren't talking about a king that wants counsel, we are speaking of a king that insists people tell him how wise he is. His wish was for John to tell him how much God loved and adored him and accepted his devilish lifestyle the way it was. John, son of Zacharias, on his knees, face buried in the corner praying to God for deliverance. Praying that his effort and his struggle was worthy of God's gratitude. Praying that his efforts were not in vain. When he is not deep in prayer he is sharing the love of God with his cellmates. Sharing the salvation brought on by the Son of Man who has come to cleanse our putrid souls.

Now he is finding himself questioning certain things. Should he have followed his dad's footsteps and preached in the temple? Should he have married and followed a more traditional life? Even more importantly, was the man that he was sure that he was the forerunner to really the Messiah? As a youth he never witnessed Jesus perform miracles or exercise His authority as one who would be the Son of God. He witnessed a wise and humble young man who seemed to seek God's will in every occasion. As he began to preach, revelation and scripture revealed to him just who Jesus was and when he saw Him approaching him at the

Jordan River he knew that this was a moment that scripture would be fulfilled. He knew that this was the Savior of the people and after His baptism John led all of those that followed him to Jesus. He was not seeking glory or fame, he was only concerned with the will of God and what he could do to see the people find God's mercy and salvation. Once he led his followers like Andrew and John to Jesus this is where he ended up.

The tiny window has been of use to John. A handful of his disciples have come to fill him in on the ways of Jesus. The miracles that He has performed, the prayers that He has prayed, the lessons and parables that He has taught. They have come by from time to time to ensure him that his close relative (probably cousin) is in fact the Messiah that they have been waiting for and have expected from God's Word. He was not mistaken, he was right on point, this is the one to crush the head of Satan, that will save the ones who profess His name from eternal damnation. They tell him how fondly Jesus speaks of him, how Jesus lifts him up in prayer often and shares loving memories of His confidante. This leaves John elated, glad beyond expression, overjoyed beyond imagination. He prays to God fervently, taking time out to share the story of Jesus with the men in his midst. How they can have hope, they can know life beyond the four slimy, molded, cock roach covered walls. Looking towards Jesus causes them to look past the squalor. There is a small trough that they share for their water and John puts it to good use as the men say "here is water, what hinders me from being baptized?" He makes the most of this opportunity, baptizing them for the remission of sins, teaching them to pray, look at the scrolls of scripture that his good friends have brought by. He teaches them the ways of Abraham, Moses, Isaac and so many other, including the prophets, not fully grasping that he is the final prophet leading to Christ.

He can hear the commotion in the distance, Herod is having a party, and he can hear a soldier call his name. Does the king wish to see him? Will his counsel be requested? Do his wife or daughter wish to hear what he has to say? When he sees the soldier with the axe he knows the answer is none of the above. His head is bowed in prayer with so many things going through his head right now. Praying for forgiveness and gratitude for so many things. The upbringing that he was given, the doctrine that he was taught, the joy of baptizing the Savior of the world, the ability to preach the gospel to all who would listen, including the one who was going to take his life, the soldier and the king. Although decapitation is a noble way of death in Greek and Roman culture, it is of little meaning to John. One way is just as good as the next. He had one job, his job was finished and now it was time to be with the Father. His brethren are crying out for the soldier to have mercy on him but John puts them at ease, ensuring them that he is alright, this is his time and he is ready. He kneels down and willingly bows his head in prayer, making it easier for the soldier to reach the bend of his neck. "Holy and Heavenly Father, thank you for the time that you gave me, thank you for the ability to see my Savior face to face and converse with Him over the years, thank you for the ability to profess Your name and seek Your will. Amen!"