

## SM007 – The Humble Prophet

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus lasted well into the night. Nicodemus had asked many questions. Jesus had provided many answers, and the two men parted in peace. Nicodemus was deeply moved by all that Jesus had said. His message of being born again, of a fresh start by the Spirit of God was something that stirred deeply within his soul. It satisfied a hunger, and quenched a thirst that had been growing within. And the more he thought of it, the more he realized that the Lord through the prophets had spoken of just such a work when the kingdom would come.

“I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” (Ezek 36:26-27)

The Passover festival was now over. It had not been everything the disciples had hoped. They thought Jesus might openly declare that he was the Messiah. But he had not. Instead, he had acted, almost secretly, like in Cana when he turned the water into wine and only the servants knew about it. Yes, he had performed more mighty works of power. He had healed several people and many saw his works. But Jesus would not openly commit himself to the people’s wishes. He backed away from their words of praise as if he did not trust them or believe them. And he shared openly about himself with one man only, Nicodemus the Pharisee.

“What now, Jesus? Where will we go? What will we do?” the disciples asked

“We must go into the villages of Judea. I have a message for all. I must preach and teach in the villages and synagogues, and you will join me in this great work.” And so Jesus and his small band of followers – Peter, Andrew, John, Nathanael, and Philip went into the countryside of Judea with its villages. They were not far from where John was still preaching, but now Jesus began to lift his voice to all!

“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. God is beginning to work among his people as he foretold by the prophets. Turn from your sins, all those things that enslave you. Give your heart freshly to God. The reign of God is coming to you with joy, with compassion, with mercy, and with power. But you must be ready and you must be watchful for it comes in a way and at a time that you may not expect.”

“Jesus,” the disciples asked, “the people love your teaching! Shouldn’t we baptize these people like John did? He said that his baptism prepared them for the coming of the kingdom. Shouldn’t we do the same?”

“Yes, you may baptize them, and I hope that you and they will understand what it means. I hope people will see that following God means walking in the steps of humility and in obedience. This will be so important for them to understand my mission.

The multitudes thronged to Jesus to hear him preach, and the disciples baptized them just like John had baptized them. The people had heard John preach and announce the coming of the kingdom, but they had never heard anyone preach like Jesus.

And there was another difference, Jesus healed people! Jesus did not just talk about the power of the kingdom, he actually showed it in acts of mercy and compassion to those in need. Every day Jesus would preach and heal, and every evening he would gather in private with his disciples, reviewing what had happened that day, and shaping their minds to understand what the kingdom of God was about and how it would come into the world in a way that would surprise many. But how much did they understand? Only time would tell.

Not far away and to the north of where Jesus was, in a place called Aenon near Salim where there was much running water for baptizing, John the prophet continued to labor in the ministry God had given him. He continued to proclaim that the Messiah was among them and the kingdom of God would soon be revealed to all.

“You must prepare yourselves for the coming of the kingdom. Enter these waters and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Do not rely on the rules of the Pharisees and Sadducees to purify yourselves. Humble yourselves, confess your sins, repent and be baptized.”

A man was listening to John preach. He seemed deep in thought and he had a question. He wanted to ask John but he was still speaking and he did not want to interrupt so he approached some men he recognized as John’s helpers and he said,

“Sirs, I have a question. I would like to ask your teacher, John, but I’ll ask you for now. It has to do with purification.”

“Ask, and we’ll try to answer.”

“Our leaders, the rulers of our land, tell us that we must do many things to protect ourselves from impurity before God. We must not touch anything unclean – dead animals or dead people for instance. We must not touch a woman in her menstrual time, we must not touch any man who has running sores, we cannot eat certain foods. If we do any of these things, we must undergo many procedures to cleanse ourselves of our impurity so that we are once again right with God. But your teacher, John, says none of these things. He tells us only to repent and to wash ourselves in this river to prepare for the kingdom. Who is right? Who should we trust?”

John’s disciples started to answer, but the man continued, “And there one more thing – there is a new teacher not far from here. I have heard him also. His name is Jesus. He is saying the same thing, his disciples are baptizing people like John is, and he has even larger crowds than your master. It seems that everyone is now going to him to hear him preach.”

Just at that moment John had finished his message for the day. The crowds started to disperse and John's disciples took the man to John to talk to him personally.

“Rabbi, this man has a question for you, a good question and we were going to answer, but you finished for the day so we thought we would bring him to you. His question is about how a person makes himself pure before God. He also told us that Jesus is preaching not far from here and that the crowds that you used to have he now has. It seems that Jesus is starting a movement and all people are joining him. If that is true, what will you do? What will happen if no one remains to listen to you?”

John paused, looked at the small crowd that was now dispersing and said, “Which question shall I answer first? This man's on purity before God, or yours about what I will do if no one comes to listen to me? You seem so concerned about me! What will I do if no one follows me and everyone follows him?”

John sat down. He gathered his followers around him and the man who had the question about purity and said, “Sit with me for a while. I have many important things to share with you. Your question about purity and your concern about everyone following Jesus are one and the same.”

John bowed his head. He seemed deep in thought and then he spoke.

“What I have been doing these past months is because God commanded and empowered me. I am not doing this on my own strength. I have been prepared for this since my birth. The mission I have been fulfilling is something God has given me. A man cannot perform any task that has any value unless it comes from God in heaven above, and I have done what I have done because he has given this for me to do. If he wishes for me to preach one more day, then one more day I will preach and no more. If he wishes for me to stop what I am doing and to follow Jesus, then that is what I will do. Obedience to what God has given, that is what purifies a man.”

“You who have followed me these many months, don't you remember what I have been saying all along, ‘I am not the Messiah. I have only been sent to prepare everyone for him!’ If I am not the Messiah, then everyone must follow him. I want everyone to follow him, and that is how people will be purified, by him and his kingdom.”

“Yes, but you are the one who prepares the way of the Lord. Surely there is more he wishes you to do!”

“Is there? Let me explain this to you another way. Think of a wedding. We know the important role that the friend of the bridegroom has. He helps to arrange the marriage for the groom and the bride, he presides over the festivities of the wedding day, it is a position of great honor, but when the wedding vows are completed, it is the groom who receives the bride. And when the friend hears the groom speak words of joy over his bride, the friend of the groom rejoices with him but the groom is the one who gets the bride, not the friend of the groom. And so when I hear that all

people are flocking to him and listening to his voice, I rejoice, because the people are his just as a bride belongs to the groom.

“What you have told me brings me joy! I want all to follow him. He must become greater and greater. I must become less and less. He must increase. I must decrease.”

The conversation lasted well into the night, about Jesus, about purity, about how many were following Jesus, about how few were now following John and what John’s future might hold. One wonders how much these men understood. But we do know one man understood – and his heart was full of joy. John, the prophet, the humble prophet knew that he had succeeded in his mission. He had prepared the way of the Lord.

### **Interlude**

For many people, the words humble and prophet do not go together. One thinks of a prophet as a fiery preacher, sometimes judgmental who is always talking about sin, and for some reason we think that is not a mark of humility. But nothing could be further from the truth, as we have seen. Prophets, true prophets, are among the humblest people on the planet, and John was no exception to this truth.

When John’s helpers told him that Jesus was getting bigger crowds, the prophet answered with deep humility. Were John’s disciples jealous for their master? They need not be. Did they miss the crowds and the excitement? They should not! Everything John did was a gift from heaven, John was sent to prepare the way of the Messiah, John was not the groom at the wedding but only the friend of the groom. John’s joy was full in knowing that people were flocking to Jesus. John knew that his ministry must diminish even as Jesus’ ministry must increase and his name spread throughout the land.

One of the disciples of Jesus would write about this for all of us to read in his Gospel. His name was John, too. He was a fisherman. He had followed John the prophet and when the prophet had pointed to Jesus he followed Jesus immediately. But years later he would record these words of humility for us to read, and he would record something more. He would record why John was so humble and why we must be humble, too, for he would speak about the greatness of the One to whom the multitudes flocked. He would speak of the greatness of Jesus and these are the words that he wrote.

<sup>31</sup> “He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. We are of the earth, and we speak of earthly things, but he has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. <sup>32</sup> He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! <sup>33</sup> Anyone who accepts his testimony can affirm that God is true. <sup>34</sup> For he is sent by God. He speaks God’s words, for God gives him the Spirit without limit. <sup>35</sup> The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands. <sup>36</sup> And anyone who believes in God’s Son has eternal life.

Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment."

In these words, we find several reasons why John was humble and why we must be humble, too.

First, we learn that Jesus Messiah is above all. He is from heaven. We are from the earth. He is eternal and glorious. We are limited and made of dust.

He is wiser than any philosopher.

He is more knowledgeable than any teacher.

He is more powerful than any leader.

He is more insightful than any prophet,

and He is more glorious than any angel.

He did not begin when He started preaching in Israel.

He did not begin when He turned the water into wine.

He did not begin when He met His first disciples.

He did not begin when He met the enemy and conquered Him in the desert.

He did not begin when He was baptized in the Jordan River.

He had no beginning. He has always lived. He doesn't derive His life from earthly parents. He derives His life eternally from His Father in heaven. He is from heaven and He is above all and just as John the prophet knew this and humbled himself before the greatness of Jesus, we too must humble ourselves before the One who is above all.

Second, Jesus is the faithful testifier. The apostle John wrote it this way: "He testifies about what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them!" ~~Do you remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus? "If I have told you earthly things and you are having trouble with them, what are you going to do if I start telling you heavenly things? What are you going to do if I start telling you things that no other man could tell you because no other man has gone into heaven. But that is why I came down from heaven."~~

This is exactly what Jesus did, what He had seen and heard from the Father, that is what he talked about. Jesus wasn't like other teachers of his time who got their stories and messages from other teachers. Jesus got His words directly from God. Jesus had information from heaven that no one else had and Jesus was telling people about the true God and God's desire to reign on earth and to bring people into His kingdom by the new birth.

Sadly, many rejected His testimony. Many would not listen to Him but to those who did, they were affirming that God was faithful and true to His promises of old, and that the things coming to pass were what the prophets said would come to pass – that God would send His Messiah, bring salvation to His people, and to the nations of the world. This is why we would do well to

follow John's footsteps on the highway of humility – Jesus is the One with the words of truth. All words of truth originate with Him.

Here is a third reason why we must follow in the humble footsteps of John: Jesus is the One who gives the Spirit. John had talked about this. When John preached in the wilderness He said, "One is coming who is mightier than I am and I am not fit to remove the sandals from his feet. I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit, that is what the people of God needed. Yes, they needed prophets but what they needed most was the Spirit of God to come and live within them. The prophets of old spoke about this. The prophet Joel had said:

"Then, after doing all those things,  
I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.  
Your old men will dream dreams,  
and your young men will see visions.  
<sup>29</sup> In those days I will pour out my Spirit  
even on servants—men and women alike. Joel 2:28-29 nlt

*Isaiah said:*

<sup>3</sup> For I will pour out water to quench your thirst  
and to irrigate your parched fields.  
And I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants,  
and my blessing on your children.  
<sup>4</sup> They will thrive like watered grass,  
like willows on a riverbank.

This is how we know that Jesus speaks the words of God, because He is the One to whom the Father gave the Spirit without measure and the one who gives us the Spirit without measure as the prophets foretold.

The apostle John continued his words of wonder about Jesus. He said,

"The Father loves his Son and has put everything into his hands." Above all else, the Father loves His Son. Yes, God loves you and me but above all else, the Father loves the Son.

He is the Father's treasured possession.

He is the apple of God's eye.

He is the Beloved of the Father.

He is the One who has dwelt in the heart of God forever.

And when this eternal Son of God became a man, the Father did not stop loving him but loved him all the more for becoming one of us.

And we want to have the attention? We want people to look at us? We want people to think we are great? We want life to revolve around us? We had better run after John, the humble prophet and walk as he walked and direct everyone's attention to Jesus.

The apostle John also told us that the Father has given all things into the hands of Jesus. They belong to Him anyway because He is the creator, but now they doubly belong to Him because He is the redeemer and he has purchased all things by His blood on the cross.

He has inherited everything.

All authority in heaven and on earth is His.

All powers in heavenly places have bowed the knee to Him.

Nothing is done anywhere in creation without His permission.

His is the name above all names.

All the angels in heaven worship Him.

He fills all things and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain Him.

Why would it matter if the crowds were going to Jesus? All things belong to Him, including us, and eventually we must become part of the multitude that follows Jesus.

There is one more reason the apostle John gives us why we should walk in the footsteps of the humble prophet. Listen to these words:

“Anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment.” Jesus is the one who has eternal life. John the prophet was not the Savior of the world. Jesus is the Savior of the world. John the prophet was not the Lord of the earth. Jesus is the Lord of the earth. John was not the giver of life. Jesus is the giver of life and He is the only one who can rescue us from the just wrath of God that falls upon those who disobey Him. Jesus is our Savior. He is our Shield. He is our life and He is the One who delivers us from wrath.

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When John finished talking with his disciples, we don't know what they did. More may have left him and started following Jesus.

The days would get long and lonely for John. He believed it was still his task to preach in Israel and to point people to the coming kingdom. But the hundreds and thousands who had come to hear him preach were now only a memory. And there were rumors, rumors that Herod was deeply upset with him for his preaching and would send his troops to arrest him.

Should John run? Should John hide? No, he would continue proclaiming His message of repentance to all who would listen including Herod himself, and he would point them all to the

One he had baptized and upon whom he had seen the Spirit rest. Life was not about John. Life was about Jesus. John was a voice in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord, and the Lord had now come. His heart was at rest and at peace.

What was that sound in the distance? Was it the sound of horses' hooves? Soldiers were coming. Herod's soldiers. John lifted his face to heaven and smiled. His work was finished. He would decrease. But Jesus would increase. John might be stopped. But no one would be able to stop Jesus. John turned to his followers and said, "Hide yourselves!"

He strode into the waters and with one last great shout proclaimed to the soldiers who approached, "Have you come for baptism? How wonderful! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" The soldiers roughly grabbed him, bound him, and led him away to Macherus, the stronghold and prison of Herod.