

2

THE BARBARIAN CALL

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Matthew 11:1-6)

If I'm right about this whole barbarian thing, then the women and men closest to God will most powerfully live

out the raw and untamed spirit of the barbarian. We should ask, for instance: When Jesus walked among us, who did He choose to represent Him? Or maybe we should go back even a bit farther and ask, What kind of person did God choose to prepare the way for the coming of His Son? His name was John. We know him better as John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was a true barbarian. John was introduced to us with the full force of his personality.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the

Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:1-12)

Several things about John stand out right away. He was an unusual dresser with strange eating habits. Just in case you're

uncertain, wearing clothes made of camel's hair was not the height of fashion, even during the time of Jesus. We are told he ate locusts and wild honey. I suppose the wild honey was to help get the locusts down.

He was clearly not a fan of the established religious leaders. His nickname for the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were the pinnacle of the religious elite, was "brood of vipers." Nope, that was not a term of endearment. And I think it's important to note that his fire-and-brimstone message was entirely directed toward the religious, not the irreligious. He was a barbarian in the midst of civilization. And frankly the civilization made him sick. He had no patience for domesticated religionists who were drowning in their own self-righteousness.

Oh, and by the way, he had no formal education, no degrees. His occupation was prophet, and his mailing address was the wilderness. To say the very least, he was not the person whom anyone was expecting to prepare the way for the Messiah. John was the voice that proclaimed the coming of the Christ, and through his encounters with Jesus, we can rediscover the barbarian call.

BEYOND DOUBT

Hot 0

John sent his disciples to ask Jesus a question: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3). It was a fair question, wouldn't you think? In fact, it's a question that all of us should ask. If Jesus is not the One, we should not follow Him. But if He is the One, we should follow Him at all costs.

I myself asked this question about twenty years ago. I hope that you have asked this question. I always feel hopeful when a person who has been indifferent begins to ask this question about Jesus. Yet for John, this question seemed entirely out of place. How could John be uncertain whether Jesus was the One? Remember, Jesus and John were cousins. Mary and Elizabeth were pregnant with their sons at the very same time. In an extraordinary story recorded by Luke, we are told,

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in

her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (1:39-45)

Do you see it? When John was inside his mother's womb and Jesus was inside His mother's womb, John leaped. He recognized Jesus from the fetal position. I can only imagine a little voice emanating from Elizabeth's belly, asking, "Are You the One, or should we look for another?" In the womb, John knew, but then thirty years later he was uncertain?

And it seems that God was prepared to clarify in John's adulthood what he knew before he was born. In the first chapter of the gospel of John, John the Baptist was in the middle of a controversial conversation with the religious leaders (vv. 19-28). John was clear that his one mission was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. It was his job to point others to

Jesus Him. And that was exactly what he did. It was never his intention to gather a following to himself. His ultimate desire for any of his disciples was that they would become devoted followers of the Messiah to come.

On one occasion the apostle John told us, "The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!' When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus" (John 1:35-37).

One of those two disciples was Andrew, who became one of the Twelve that we have come to know as the apostles. He was also Simon Peter's brother. Even so early in the process, John was clear about who Jesus was. He was absolutely certain about the identity of Jesus—so much so that he led his disciples to become Jesus' followers. Why at that point wasn't John running up to Jesus and saying, "Are You the One? All you Nazarenes look the same."

BEYOND QUESTION

In between these two encounters, we find why John was so certain. The gospel tells us,

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."
(John 1:29-34)

Induced but then confirmed

John confessed that he was uncertain about whether Jesus was really the One. But His baptism removed all doubt. Matthew told us that in the moment John baptized Jesus, the heavens were opened, and John saw the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove and lighting on Him. And he also heard a voice from heaven declare, "This is my Son,

whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16–17).

In other words, by that time John was absolutely clear about one thing: Jesus was the One. I guarantee you, no one else whom John baptized had that kind of drama surrounding the event. A voice coming out of the heavens, and what by today's standards would be amazing special effects, would be enough to convince even the most skeptical of us. John was neither unclear nor uncertain, and in his barbaric rawness the untamed prophet defied anyone who would deny the legitimacy of Jesus.

With that knowledge John declared his subservience to the purpose and person of Jesus the Christ. Without shame or ambiguity he would declare to those who questioned him, "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" (John 1:26–27).

So what in the world was John thinking then? How could he send his disciples with a question like that? How could he be gripped with so much doubt that he would risk spreading it to his disciples? All who were close to him had heard him declare the supremacy of Jesus. All of them had to be affected

by the strength of his confidence in who Jesus was. Why would he ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3).

HEAD GAMES

We don't have to go far to find the reason for John's confusion. Just before Matthew recorded John's question, he let us know what prompted John's crisis of faith. John was in prison. Herod arrested John and put him in prison on account of Herodias. Herodias was the wife of his brother Philip, and Herod was having an affair with her. In his expectedly barbaric way, John called it for what it was, refusing to placate Herod or cower to Herod's power. Herod wanted to kill John, but he feared the reaction of the people. The people loved John because they considered him a prophet from God.

Anyway, one day it was Herod's birthday, and the daughter of Herodias danced for him. Herod was so pleased (I think this alludes to the dark and evil kind of pleased) that he made an oath to give her whatever she asked. In a plot between Herodias and her daughter, they asked for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Though the king was distressed for political

reasons, he granted what they asked (Matthew 14:1–12). That was the backdrop of John's dilemma.

John was living between prison and platter when he sent the message to Jesus. Shouldn't he expect Jesus to drop everything and come to his aid? After all, he had always been there for Jesus. Where was He when John needed Him? Was He unaware that John needed help? Was He indifferent to John's dilemma? Or was He simply not the Messiah as John had always believed?

When Jesus received the inquiry from John's disciples, He gave an impressive response: "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:4–6).

At first glance you would think Jesus was trying to inspire John. Something like, "Don't sweat it, John. I'm doing everything that you would expect of a Messiah." You have to admit it's a pretty impressive résumé—the blind seeing, the lame walking, people with leprosy being cured, the deaf hearing, even the dead being raised, and to top it all off, the good news

being preached to the poor. How do you argue with that? You just expect John to be overwhelmed with joy, come back to his senses, and wonder how he could ever have questioned whether Jesus was the One.

Except for one problem: John already knew all of that. In fact, Matthew told us that was a part of the problem: "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him . . ." (11:2-3). Well, you know the question. The amazing and inspiring work of Jesus didn't eliminate John's doubts; it actually fueled them.

Talk about a dilemma. Why would Jesus' doing so much good jeopardize John's faith? How could the very things that Jesus was doing to help others cause John to lose heart? When we look at Jesus' response to John, we see one line that just doesn't fit. After He reinforced all of the evidence that He was the Messiah, retelling His miraculous work among the people, He closed with this seemingly disconnected thought: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Why would Jesus add that? Why would He even consider the thought that someone might fall away with so much good happening? I can't imagine anyone coming up to me and saying, "Too many blind people are regaining their sight.

I'm having a crisis of faith." Or someone confronting me with, "If one more person who is paralyzed rises and walks, I'm out of here." Miracles are rarely followed by a flood of recanting. Why would Jesus feel He needed to exhort John that "after all this good has been confirmed to you, you will be blessed if you do not fall away on account of Me"?

What Jesus was saying to John has been far too barbaric for us to keep in the mainstream of the Christian faith. Jesus was saying to him, "John, I'm not coming through for you. I'm not getting you out of prison. I'm not sparing your life. Yes, I have done all this and more for others, but the path I choose for you is different from theirs. You'll be blessed, John, if this does not cause you to fall away."

If that were not bad enough, we find the dissonance of this reality accentuated in one verse. In his opening chapter, Mark stated, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God" (1:14).

What exactly, one might ask, was the good news for John?
Jesus knew all along that John had been imprisoned. He very
well knew the fate that John would face. Even then Jesus
understood His purpose was to save us not from pain and suf-
fering, but from meaninglessness. For Jesus, John was exactly

(continue →)

where he needed to be, fulfilling God's purpose for his life. Why would He save John from that? In that same passage Jesus explained, "The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

A DANGEROUS INVITATION

So what is this good news? The refined and civilized version goes something like this: Jesus died and rose from the dead so that you can live a life of endless comfort, security, and indulgence. But really this is a bit too developed. Usually it's more like this: if you'll simply confess that you're a sinner and believe in Jesus, you'll be saved from the torment of eternal hellfire, then go to heaven when you die. Either case results in our domestication. One holds out for life to begin in eternity, and the other makes a mockery out of life.

The call of Jesus is far more barbaric than either of these. It is a call to live in this world as citizens of an entirely different kingdom. In its primitive state the good news could never be separated from the invitation of Jesus to "come, follow Me." He never lied about the danger or cost associated with becoming His follower. He told them up front, "I am sending

you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

One danger of civilized faith is that we become so domesticated, we begin to live as shrewd as the dove. We are blind to the spiritual nature of life and the unseen reality in which we reside. Another danger is that we become as innocent as snakes. For far too long, sincere followers of Christ have had to live with the consequences of those who use religion to manipulate others and camouflage hypocrisy. Jesus made clear to those who were choosing to be His disciples what kind of leader He was and what kind of followers would be required.

When Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." Jesus went on to tell him,

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain

the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"
(Luke 9:20-25)

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

There was no pristine call to a proper religion. It was a barbaric call to a barbarian way. Peter understood that and struggled to live up to it. Jesus' words about love ignited the primal fires within Peter's faith. Longing to follow Jesus even to His death, he declared to Jesus, "Lord, why can't I follow You now? I will lay down my life for You."

Jesus' simple response was, "Will you really lay down your life for Me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows you will disown Me three times." (See Matthew 26:31-35.)

Yes, Peter failed in his endeavor, but he understood what Jesus was asking for. Love and sacrifice were inseparable. The barbarian way is not about violence fueled by vengeance and hatred. The barbarian way is about love expressed through sacrifice and servanthood.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter and Jesus had another conversation about love and sacrifice. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. And each time Peter

responded by adamantly declaring his love. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love Me?" Peter's response was, "Lord, You know all things. You know that I love You."

Ready to move the conversation to a deeper level, Peter found himself being called to the barbarian way. Jesus said to him, "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (John 21:17-19).

Jesus had only one invitation for Peter, only one course set for him, only one path for him to choose if he were to journey with Christ—and that was the way of the barbarian. Jesus never watered down the cost of following Him in hopes that Peter would then choose to follow. If Peter chose the path with Christ, it would mean for him that one day he would be taken against his will and dragged off to be killed. If he wanted to live a life of love and allegiance to the Christ, it would cost him his life. We, too, are called to a path filled with uncertainty, mystery, and risk.

So how did Peter respond? He turned and made John the focus of the conversation: "Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is going to betray you?') When Peter saw him, he asked, 'Lord, what about him?'" (John 21:20-21).

I know exactly what Peter was doing. He was thinking, *If I'm going to die, I want to make sure everyone else has to die, especially him. After all, if the barbarian call is for all of us, wouldn't it come out the same for all of us? Wouldn't all of us have to suffer hardship and die a brutal death?* But it just doesn't work that way.

Jesus answered him, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (John 21:22).

This is the sticky part of the barbarian call. It's not fair or equitable. When you hear the call, when you follow the call, you must recognize that it is a life-and-death proposition. When you understand what Jesus means when He says that you must follow Him, you finally realize that this is not a cattle call. He is not calling you to the same life that everyone else will live. He's not even calling you to the same path that every follower of Christ will walk. Your life is unique