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*Jesus Up Close*

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O N E

## A Messenger in the Middle of Nowhere

### *A Man with a Purpose*

*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."*

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*

*Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.*

*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* (Matthew 3:1-17, NIV)



*John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29, NIV)



Sixty miles northwest of Detroit, Michigan, is the city of Flint, the heart of the American automobile industry. Many years ago automakers in Flint kept hundreds of dies—or molds—they used for making various models of cars so that for a ten-year period, the manufacturer could reproduce the same model for thousands of buyers. That meant that your car could be identical to your neighbor's car.

God does not work with molds. When he creates a man or a woman, He makes no reproductions, no replicas. That was certainly true of John the "Baptizer." John was one of a kind. No die was cast for him. He stood out from the crowd.

One of the unique things about John was that he had an unusual mission. In fact, John's personal mission statement was delivered to him before he was born! An angel announced John's assignment and made it clear that he was to be a special child.

## A Divine Calling

John's father, Zechariah, was one of the many Jewish temple priests who served on a yearly schedule. During his turn to perform the priestly duties he caught a glimpse of God's plan. He and his wife, Elizabeth, were childless, a stigma regarded in that culture as a sign of divine disfavor. But one day in the temple, Zechariah was startled when an angel appeared with a delightfully surprising message: "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! For God has heard your prayer, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son! And you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice with you at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or hard liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will per-

suade many Israelites to turn to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah, the prophet of old. He will precede the coming of the Lord, preparing the people for his arrival. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will change disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom” (Luke 1:13-17, *NLT*). What a sense of joy and responsibility Zechariah and Elizabeth must have had when they thought about the angel’s words.

We can imagine that as John grew, his parents had lengthy conversations with him, reinforcing the angel’s words. We can almost hear Zechariah and Elizabeth saying, “God has special plans for you, John. You must prepare yourself. As our prophet Elijah once did, you will persuade people to turn to God again and you will prepare them to receive the Messiah.”

Sometime during his upbringing, John gravitated toward the writings of the prophet Isaiah, who predicted a heralding voice that would speak to Israel. “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God’ ” (Isa. 40:3, *NIV*). In response to that prophecy, John, probably as a teenager or young adult, went to live in the barren wilderness near the Dead Sea in order to prepare the way for the Lord—whatever that would mean. In an age when the spiritual light had dimmed in the Jewish nation, John was to be a divine flashlight enabling people to walk on God’s righteous path.

## The Wilderness Pulpit

At first glance many people probably thought John was an odd fellow, an eccentric. He wore strange clothing. He lived a simple, secluded life in the wilderness. Eating off the land, he foraged for wild honey common to the area as well as for protein-rich locusts, one of the few insects not forbidden by the ancient Jewish dietary laws.

People were curious about who John was and what he was doing. When priests and Levites were sent out from Jerusalem to ask John if he was the Messiah, he clearly told him that he was not (see John 1:20). When they pressed him about who he was, he replied with the prophetic words from Isaiah: “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’ ” (v. 23, *NIV*).

His audience knew what those words meant. In ancient times, when a king came into a province, a herald would precede him, proclaiming, “Get ready! The king is coming!” Preparations were then made for the

monarch's arrival: people would repair the roads, clearing debris, patching holes, and making crooked paths straight.

One of the ways John was preparing the path for people to meet Jesus was to preach and baptize. With the rocky wilderness as his backdrop, John baptized people and spoke of coming judgment, following the example of the Old Testament prophets such as Joel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. John didn't preach milky, sweet sermons but went directly to the point, regardless of whether his message might offend. John went for the jugular: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2). No opening illustration. No alliterated points. No fluff. He delivered truth as simply as he lived his life.

And the people responded. The Scripture tells us that people from Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went to hear John, to confess their sins, and to have him baptize them in the Jordan (vv. 5-6).

John never minced words. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him, he called them a brood of snakes and confronted them about their hypocrisy, reminding them that they were not spiritually secure just because they were descendants of Abraham. With fearless courage John preached his uncompromising message.

Why was John so harsh? Why the strong denunciations? Because John hadn't yet encountered Jesus. John was taking all his cues so far from the written word; he had not yet met the living Word.

John's message was accurate, of course. Judgment of sin was coming, and it would be administered by the very Lord he was heralding. John had every right to make strong denunciations against those who repeatedly broke God's laws and misrepresented God to the nation. But that was only part of the truth. The rest of the picture would be seen only after John met Jesus.

## **The Messenger Meets the Messiah**

John's encounter with the Messiah occurred when Jesus, John's cousin, journeyed from His hometown at Nazareth to John's desert parish, where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea. But Jesus caught John off guard by doing a surprising thing. When Jesus arrived, He deliberately stepped into the muddy waters of the Jordan, made his way toward John, and waited His turn to be baptized. John was confused because he knew that baptism was something only sinners needed to do, demonstrating their need for forgiveness of sins. John was resistant.

He was not ready to baptize Jesus. *It doesn't make sense; it just isn't right*, John must have thought. Jesus didn't need to repent of any sin. Why was He standing around all these sinners as if He were one of them?

John protested, saying, "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you, . . . so why are you coming to me?"

But Jesus firmly replied, "It must be done, because we must do everything that is right" (Matt. 3:14-15, NLT). So John submitted to his Lord's command and baptized Him.

Jesus was saying in essence, "My baptism is important, John, because by it I'm identifying with sinful people. John, you denounce sin, and that's good, but that will never cure sin. Righteousness needs to be fulfilled, and that's why I've come—to do what no one else could ever do—to make people right with God" (see Matthew 3:15, NKJV). John the Baptist was learning in that instant that Israel's long-awaited Messiah had come to identify with broken, fallen humanity. He wanted to launch His ministry among the common people, the sinful ones, those who knew they needed God to do a new work in their lives.

Although John balked at first because of his traditional understanding of the Messiah's role, he was growing in that understanding. John had been proclaiming a conquering king who would judge the sinful world and set things in order. As true as that would one day be, John was also beginning to learn that Jesus would come first to identify with that sinful world. John had seen Jesus through the lens of His *final* act of judging people *for* their sin, not His *intermediate* act of rescuing people *from* their sin. All that was changing now that John met Jesus, and there was more to follow.

As soon as Jesus rose up, still dripping from the Jordan's waters, an amazing sign appeared. The heavens opened up, and John saw the Holy Spirit appear overhead in the form of a dove. To the Jewish mind, a dove was associated with sacrifice: Rich people sacrificed bulls, while poor people used doves.<sup>1</sup> John's understanding was broadened that day. He saw clearly that the Messiah was anointed by God to *be* a sacrifice—a sacrifice for all classes of society.

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through the lens of  
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act of rescuing people  
from their sin.***

Then John heard an unmistakable voice say, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). It was as if God was giving His endorsement of Jesus’ uniqueness among men and His oneness with God the Father. This announcement made it clear that Jesus was far more than *a* son of God in a general sense or in a spiritual way. This title was closely associated with Jesus’ royal position as Israel’s Messiah (see Luke 1:32-33). John got the message—*this One was the One!*

### **Encounter with the Lamb**

John’s next encounter with Jesus happened several weeks later, after Jesus had emerged victorious from a forty-day wilderness confrontation with Satan.<sup>2</sup> Again, Jesus came to the Jordan River to meet John. When John saw Him, he made an announcement that seemed to emerge from his newfound awareness of who Jesus was: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Did you notice the difference? Before John’s first encounter with Jesus, he had seen Him as the judge of sinners, the lion who would pounce on His prey (see Genesis 49:9). And John had shaped his message accordingly. But this time, rather than making a strong denunciation against the sinners, John made a strong proclamation affirming the Savior. John was beginning to realize that while Jesus was the lion, He first was to become God’s sacrificial Lamb sent to atone for the world’s sins. What accounted for this staggering change in John’s perception?

It was, no doubt, a number of things. First, the baptism encounter had an incredible impact on John. Seeing Jesus stand in the river to identify with sinners showed him that Jesus’ activity was *relational*—He was identifying with common, sinful humanity. Seeing the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove revealed that Jesus’ activity was to be *sacrificial*—He who identified with such people would somehow be involved in atoning for their sins.

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Second, I can imagine that after the baptism, John retreated to the familiarity of Scripture to try to understand why Jesus had acted as He had at the Jordan River. Very likely John searched through the scrolls of Isaiah’s prophecy—the very prophet who had predicted his own mission as

forerunner. John would have read passages predicting the Messiah's future judgment of the earth (Isa. 24) as well as His righteous reign as king (Isa. 32). But he also would have studied Isaiah 53, where he would have read, "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth" (Isa. 53:7, NLT).

John's baptismal encounter with Jesus readied him for this encounter. John's perception of who Jesus was blossomed into a mature realization that Jesus would act the part of the familiar atonement lamb used on Yom Kippur, the Jewish high holiday. John perceived that the Messiah was to be not only the *judging One* but also the *saving One*, bearing the sins John had so passionately denounced.<sup>3</sup>

This realization helped John draw a bigger circle, this time not just around a nation but around the world. This Lamb would take away not only Israel's sins but also the sins of the whole world.

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## **What Can We Learn from John's Encounters with Jesus?**

Have you met Jesus? Really met Him? Or have you merely heard about Him or read about Him or studied about Him?

If you have met Jesus, how have you been affected? What were your preconceptions about Him? Were those preconceptions supported when you met Him, or were they shattered? What difference did it make that you met Jesus? How did you grow?

Meeting Jesus made a huge difference for John the Baptist. He had studied about the man whose life would play such a major part in his own life. But until John met Jesus and saw Him act, his view of Him was very clouded. Jesus surprised John, changed him, and solidified his purpose.

### ***Meeting Jesus May Surprise You***

Meeting Jesus shattered John's preconceptions of what He would be like. Jesus did not act like a king. He did not act like a judge. Instead He acted like a lamb who would take on Himself the sins of the whole world.

Meeting Jesus may shatter your preconceptions too. He may not act the way you thought He would. Jesus may surprise you as you learn about His openness to sinners or His anger at religious snobbery or His indifference toward people's status. He may surprise you with His willingness to enter your world or to forgive your sin or to give you a second chance.

When He does surprise you, don't be resistant, as John was initially. Instead be open to the ways in which Jesus may want to shape you.

If you have faulty ideas of who Jesus is, ask yourself where those misconceptions originated. Have you adopted other people's perspectives of who Jesus is? Have you bought into the culture's view? How can you meet Jesus and discover for yourself who He is?

One obvious way is to immerse yourself in the Bible, the written revelation of who Jesus is. As you discover more of His character on the pages of Scripture, allow Him to speak to you and direct you. Begin your reading with the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)—the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life on earth. As you gain new insights into His style, His promises, and even His challenges and rebukes, your relationship with Him will grow. Someone once noted that "God is never greater than our present understanding of Him." In other words, we will relate to God only at the level that we know Him.

***Be open to the ways in which Jesus may want to shape you.***

But also make sure that you meet the living Word. Spend time with His people. Meet Him in worship. Be where He is active, where He brings healing to broken people, or where He rescues people from the darkness of their sin.

Then let Him surprise you.

### ***Meeting Jesus Will Change You***

Meeting Jesus changed John in two significant ways: his understanding and his message.

*Understanding.* When John met Jesus at the Jordan River, he began to get insight into His character. He saw Jesus' compassion as He stood in the same water as sinners, the people John knew really needed to be there. As a result John saw into the heart of God. He saw God's matchless love as Jesus descended to the level of sinful humanity.

Every time John discovered more about Jesus, his understanding and faith grew.

When we first encounter Jesus, we usually gain an understanding of some of the fundamentals: Jesus loves me, He forgave my sins, and one day I'm going to be with Him in heaven forever. Those are great truths. They are transforming truths. But there's much more to the Christian life than stopping right there. Christianity isn't about just one encounter. The more you meet with Jesus, the more deeply you will get to know Him. And the more you know Him, the more you will love Him and want to serve Him.

Discovering Jesus is what brings a thrill to the Christian life. I can still remember the drudgery that going to church was for me when I was growing up. It was an enforced event. I *had* to do it, but I really didn't *want* to do it. I didn't go to church to encounter Jesus. I wasn't expecting to meet Him in the experience of attending a church service. Years later, when I got serious about following Jesus, a sense of expectancy developed. I grew more open to discovering truths that had been kept hidden for years because I simply wasn't open to them.

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with Jesus, the more  
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know Him.***

Now that I have encountered Jesus and have felt the joy of discovery, I long for a deeper understanding. I am eager to place myself in situations where I will grow.

Seminary professor Howard Hendricks tells the story of his daughter Bev, who when she was young was deeply interested in her own growth.

She promised me she would grow while I was gone on a ministry trip for a couple of weeks. When I returned and stepped off the plane, she greeted me with, "Daddy, come home quick! We gotta see how much I grew!" So we went home to the closet door and measured. It couldn't have been more than a few millimeters, but she jumped up and down. "Daddy, I told you, I did grow!" Then we went into the living room for a special time of talking, and she asked me one of those questions you wish kids wouldn't ask: "Daddy, why do big people stop growing?"<sup>4</sup>

Searching question, isn't it? I think if we were honest with ourselves, we would probably have to admit that we stop growing spiritually whenever we stop welcoming discovery.

Be open to discovery. Allow Jesus to change your understanding of who He is.

*Message.* As you discover who Jesus is and grow in your understanding, you will find that you will speak of Him differently to others.

As we have already seen, that was the case with John. John became a signpost for the people who came to see him in the barren desert. He gave aimless hearts spiritual direction. “Get back to God” was John’s heart cry. “Follow Him and do what He requires.” It was exactly as the angel had predicted concerning John: “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16).

When the crowds came to John, he pointed people to the source of life. He saw himself as nothing but an intermediary. He never allowed himself to become the focus of the attention. When people suggested that he might be the Messiah, he set them straight and told them that he wasn’t even worthy to tie the Messiah’s sandal strap! In fact, John said of his own ministry and that of Christ’s, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Turning the creation back to their Creator, turning the sinners back to their Savior, turning the hopeless back to the source of hope became the mark of John’s message.

When you meet Jesus, allow Him to change your message too. If He has met you in your discouragement, proclaim Him to be the gentle encourager. If He has met you in the depths of your sin, proclaim Him to be the faithful forgiver. If He has met you in your confusion, proclaim Him to be only truth.

As you discover who Jesus is, tell others what you see and experience. Invite them to meet Jesus too. Be a signpost that leads them to Jesus.

### ***Meeting Jesus Will Direct You***

Why were you born? What is the purpose of your life? What direction are you traveling?

John’s purpose was clear from the beginning: His divine calling was to point people to God. For that reason John was born. For that reason he was effective. For that reason he was great. John lived to see others encounter the living Word, and that gave him a sense of fulfillment.

If you are like most people, you long to know that your life counts for something, that you have a purpose for being on earth. How will you know what that purpose is, and how will you fulfill that purpose?

Unlike John, you did not have an angel announce your calling before

you were born. But you do have two of the resources John had available to him: the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit.

John learned about his purpose by reading the Scriptures, and you can too. As you immerse yourself in the Word, as you see what God requires of His children, and as you see how Jesus interacted with people, you will find direction. The Bible reveals a God who takes a personal interest in the lives of His children, equipping them with abilities and arranging opportunities for them to use those abilities. The Holy Spirit—God’s presence in us—will then equip you to fulfill your God-given purpose. The Spirit will lead you into truth and tell you what God wants you to know (see John 16:13-15).

Everyone whom God calls has a purpose. There is a part of God’s program on earth that only you can fulfill. One of life’s greatest pursuits is to discover what that purpose is and to live within its flow, even though you may feel as if you are going against how culture says you should live.

In the icy waters off the coast of Greenland are innumerable icebergs of varying size. Even a casual observation reveals that the small ice floes move in one direction while the massive ones flow in another. The reason for this is simple. Surface winds drive the little bergs while deep ocean currents move the larger masses of ice along according to their routes. Likewise, people carried by an awareness of God’s will for their lives are pulled by a deeper current than the surface winds of trends or societal pressures.

Sometimes you may feel conflicted about the purpose you believe God has given you. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, the Scottish runner Eric Liddell had a decision to make. He was scheduled to leave for the mission field, but he felt called to run in the Olympic Games in Paris. His sister tried to convince him that if he ran in the Olympics, it would indicate that he put sports above Christ. In a discussion with his sister, Eric Liddell responded, “I know God made me for a purpose. . . . But He also made me fast! And when I run, I feel His pleasure!” Liddell knew that be-

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ing a missionary was God's plan for his life, but he also believed that running in the Olympics was a part of that grand design.

John the Baptist knew God had made him for a purpose, and he lived to be obedient to that design. When John preached in the desert, he could feel God's pleasure. When he met Jesus Christ and learned of His mission, he could feel God's pleasure. Being the voice in the wilderness gave John the sense of fulfilling the plan of God in his own life.

When we live with a firmly developed sense of purpose, we care more about quality than quantity. One morning in 1888 Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, opened the daily newspaper and was stunned to find an article about his own death. Alfred's brother had died, but some careless reporter had confused Alfred with his brother and had written the obituary about Alfred! But the mistake made Alfred think. He realized that the world perceived him as simply the "Dynamite King." His legacy was that he was a successful industrialist who had amassed a fortune from explosives. There was no mention of his efforts for world peace. He would be remembered only for being a "merchant of death."

Alfred made an immediate decision. He determined to do something to make sure the world would remember him for the values to which he had devoted his life. He decided that this could be accomplished by the way he disposed of his vast wealth in his last will and testament. That's the reason why today we have the prestigious award given to someone who has contributed significantly to the cause of world peace—the Nobel Peace Prize.

## **How Can You Meet with Jesus?**

The whole concept of "meeting with" or "encountering" Jesus may still seem a bit fuzzy. After all, how can you meet someone who no longer lives in a physical body on earth? What does it mean for *you* to meet Jesus? It's not as complicated as you may think.

*Introduce yourself.* When you first meet a person, you generally speak. You exchange names and basic information about yourself. This is a good place to begin with Jesus, even though He already knows all about you. Tell Him that you want to have a relationship with Him. Confess that you are not quite sure about how to go about it but that you are willing to learn. Don't worry about how good your words sound to Him. He isn't interested in the form as much as the attitude and motivation behind the form. It may feel awkward at first to speak words into empty air. But trust

that He hears you. Tell Him that you are interested in finding out who He really is and that you are willing to act in response to what you find out.

*Learn about Him.* The Bible reveals what Jesus is like and what He desires from us. Just as two people can get to know each other through their correspondence, you can encounter Jesus by reading about Him—what He said about Himself, what He said about God, what He said about how He wants you to live, and how He related to others. These interactions will serve as touch points for you to learn how He wants to relate to you as well.

*Enjoy Him.* As you learn more about Jesus, you will learn to trust Him more. As you watch Him forgive people, you will be encouraged to confess your sins to Him and to find the same forgiveness. As you observe His holy nature, you will grow in your desire to stay away from activities that would offend or hurt Him. Your relating *to* Him will develop into your enjoyment *of* Him.

## FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. In what ways has Jesus surprised you? What responses, statements, or revelations in Scripture have you found to be surprising? Have you found that Jesus sometimes acted differently from what you anticipated?
2. How has your understanding of Jesus changed from your first encounter with Him? What specific things about the character of Jesus have you learned by experience? What have you learned by reading the Bible? How has your message about Jesus changed?
3. What is your God-given purpose in life? What makes you feel God's pleasure? How did God call you to that purpose? How is He equipping you to fulfill that purpose? If you do not know what your purpose is, how can you meet with Jesus and discover His plan for you? Who can help you do that?
4. John said of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). What do you think John meant by that statement? How would you change if you lived out this verse in your personal life, in your home, in your business dealings, and in your relationships?
5. Write your own obituary. Ask a friend to help you. Include the things other people feel are important about you. Is this the legacy you would like to leave? If not, how will you change that?