

Hymns: 46 I am Resolved 47 I Surrender All
Scripture: Psalm 8

Big Idea: Lose your life to gain it.

Have you ever faced a paradox? When I was a young man, just a few years into my career as an engineer, I was fresh out of school and new to the south -- having grown up in the Midwest. My colleagues soon learned that I was a Christian and some playfully called me a Yankee. One in particular, was an excellent engineer despite not having a college degree. He was a good-old-boy-brand of southerner and wise in the things of the world. But without the Lord, he was held captive to its vices.

One day, he dropped by my office and asked me "If God is so great, why can't He make a rock so big that He can't pick it up?" We had sparred before on religion and philosophy, but he caught me off-guard with that one. As I recall, I came up with a pretty good answer but didn't state it as smoothly as I can now.

The answer is that God cannot do anything that is *logically inconsistent*. The question itself is flawed. God also cannot do anything *against His nature* for that matter. For example, He cannot lie. None of these things diminish His character.

My colleague had challenged me with a paradox. At times, our lives can seem to present us with paradoxes. Today, we will see how trials in the life of John the Baptist can also be puzzling at first glance.

First, let's get our bearings with a brief review.

Review

Last time:

- We learned John the Baptist (who we'll just call *John*) preached to **all** Israel teaching repentance and the Golden Rule.
- We saw John addressed as *Rabbi* indicating he was not some nut or wild man, but a highly respected, learned teacher.
- John demonstrated his insight by calling himself the friend of the bridegroom (Note this. We will return to that expression shortly.)
- He cited the next two dispensations from his perspective in describing Christ's baptism with the Holy Ghost (Age of Grace) and with fire (Millennium).
- John baptized Jesus over John's own objection.
- He witnessed and testified to God's certification of Jesus that He was the **Son of God**.
- John coined the term *Lamb of God* to refer to Jesus.
- He pointed his disciples to Him.
- We answered that identity question: "Who was John the Baptist?"
 - Was he the Christ? No
 - Was he Elijah? John said, "No."
 - Was he "that prophet" spoken of by Moses? No
- John linked his **identity** to the *mission* the Lord called to him to do.

- That *mission* was to proclaim the coming of the Messiah and to make the path straight for Him.

We left off last time with John speaking of Jesus saying:

John 3

[30] *He must increase, but I must decrease.*

We will observe that transition in our study today. Let's get started.

By the way, what we're using for our text is a blending of scriptures into a single account. Think of it as the four gospel writers sitting in the room here with us coming in at the appropriate time to add his unique perspective to the story. Don't be thrown by that as we jump from one account to another.

John 4

[1] *When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John,*

[2] *(Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,)*

[3] *He left Judaea, and **departed again into Galilee.***

Notice first, as mentioned last time, Jesus' disciples were performing the baptisms and **not** Jesus. Also, we see the first hint of a bit of rivalry surfacing among groups of disciples. Of course, there was none between Jesus and John. They were both led by the Spirit of God. Jesus decided to return to his home up north in Galilee apparently to diffuse some of this contention between groups of disciples. But there was something else.

John Cast into Prison

Matthew 4

[12] *Now when Jesus had heard that **John was cast into prison**, he departed into Galilee;*

Mark 1 adds:

[14] *,,, preaching the **gospel of the kingdom of God**,*

So we see that Jesus went to Galilee to move his disciples away from those of John, and in response to John being thrown into prison. Notice He preached the same gospel as John had been preaching "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The decrease of John and increase of Jesus was underway. But **why** exactly was John thrown into prison?

Why John Was Thrown into Prison

Mark 6

[17] *For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him[, and **put him** (Matthew 14:3)] **in prison** for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her.*

[18] For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.

Luke 3:19 adds:
*and [reproved him] for **all the evils** which Herod had done,*

John didn't hold back in his rebuke of Herod's sins.
That was a good way to get yourself in serious trouble with the government back then. Luke also makes the point (v. 3:20) that putting John in prison itself was another evil deed of Herod.

[19] Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him [speaking of John], and would have killed him; but she could not:

Have you noticed today how it's the same way? If you can't win the argument on its merits, you shout them down, you lie, you disparage with name-calling, you resort to violence, do anything to try to silence the opposition.

Like activists today, Herodias wanted to shut up John by killing him, but she couldn't.

[Why?]

*[20] For **Herod feared John**,
knowing that he was
a just [] and
[] **holy [man]**,*

Matthew 14 adds:
*[5] And when he would have put him to death, he **feared the multitude**,
because they counted him as **a prophet**.*

[Herod not only feared John but also the multitude. Continuing in v. 20:]

*and [looked after] him;
and when he heard him, he [was perplexed],
and [yet] **heard him gladly**.*

Despite all of this, Herod liked John, and he liked hearing his teaching. We see even in prison, John faithfully proclaimed God's (perplexing) truth. Notice too the contention between Herod and his wicked wife who wanted to kill John outright.

Next, the scene shifts to John's disciples and more evidence of John's disciples' rivalry.

Disciples of John Fast

Matthew 9

*[14] Then the **disciples of John** [came to him [that is Jesus]], saying , Why do we and the Pharisees **fast** oft[en, and make prayers (Luke 5:33)], but **thy** disciples fast not?*

*[15] And Jesus said unto them, Can the [friends of the bridegroom] **mourn**, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then [they shall] fast.*

With John in prison, John's disciples certainly had occasion to mourn his fate and to mourn that he was not with them.

Notice Jesus uses the same imagery that John used and puts John's disciples in the same category as John – a friend of the bride.

Don't miss too this early, veiled reference to Jesus' death on the cross as He says His disciples will fast when He's gone.

While God declared in the law a number of **feasts** for the Jews to observe throughout the year, never did He command **any such fasts**. We do see Bible characters (notably David, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul) occasionally participate in or speak of fasting, but these were one-time events.

Fasting most often, as with David, was a spontaneous and natural outflowing of inward distress. No doubt, you've experienced the same thing in your life at times when you were not interested in eating during a time of grief. I know I have.

John Sends His Disciples to Jesus

The scene shifts, but the characters are the same – John's disciples again confront Jesus.

Matthew 11

*[2] Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ [which (according to Luke 7:16-17) made Him famous throughout the land], **he** [that is, John] **sent two of his disciples**,*

[3] [to Jesus to ask] him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

*[4] Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and sh[o]w John **again** those things which ye [] hear and see:*

[5] The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed, and

the deaf hear,

*the **dead** are raised up, and*

the poor have the gospel preached to them.

*[6] And blessed is he, whosoever **shall not be offended** [by] me.*

John's disciples witnessed Jesus' great works. Clearly, John's disciples **were** offended that their leader John was in prison while Jesus was attracting great crowds with His miracles and teaching.

*[7] And **as they departed**,*

Note this, as they left they could still hear Jesus. What did He say?

*Jesus began to say unto **the multitudes** concerning John,
What went ye out into the wilderness to see?
A reed shaken [by] the wind?
[8] ...A man clothed in soft raiment?
behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.
[9] ...A prophet?
yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.
[10] For this is he, of whom it is written,
Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.
[11] Verily I say unto you,
Among them that are born of women **there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist:**
notwithstanding he that is **least** in the kingdom of heaven is **greater** than he.*

Why? John was such a great man. Do you remember what John said. He was the “friend of the bridegroom.” John was an Old Testament saint. The church is the bride. The bride is the covenant partner with Jesus Christ. We who know Him are **joint heirs** with Him and will **rule** and **reign** with the Lord Jesus Christ. What an honor.

[12] And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

John was experiencing that violence by being shut up in prison.

*[13] For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.
[14] And if ye will receive it, **this is Eli[jah]**, which was [said] to come.
[15] He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*

We have at least two questions here, but we can only just state them for we must move on.

1. Why did Jesus call John Elijah?
2. Why did John send his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Christ?

We'll leave those two questions for you to ponder and revisit them in the wrap-up message. Don't miss it.

Luke 7 continues.

*[29] And all the people that heard, and the publicans, [confirmed] God['s way], being baptized with **the baptism of John.**
[30] But the **Pharisees and lawyers rejected** the counsel of God against themselves, **being not baptized of him.***

That was to be expected. John as well as Jesus exposed the religious leaders as frauds. They wouldn't go to him to be **baptized**. That was something for filthy Gentiles. They were descendants of Abraham. Besides, baptism indicated a change of heart. These wicked leaders were not about to admit they needed any change or cleansing.

They instead did their best to find fault with both John and Jesus – each of whom showed them up for what they were and condemned their sinful ways.

[33] *For John the Baptist came **neither eating bread nor drinking wine**; and ye say, He hath a devil.*

[34] *The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!*

It didn't matter what they did. Whatever it was, these critics criticized John and Jesus. We still see that kind of thing happening in our world. Don't we?

Death of John

Despite these critics, Jesus continued to increase. But what's next for our beloved John?

Mark 6

[21] *And when a convenient day was come, [] Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords,*

high captains,

and chief estates of Galilee;

[22] *And when the daughter of [] Herodias came in, and danced,*

and pleased Herod and them that sat with him,

the king said unto the damsel,

Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it [to] thee.

[23] *And he sware unto her,*

Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto [] half of my kingdom.

[24] *And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask?*

*And she said, **The head of John the Baptist.***

The wicked and vengeful Herodias seized on this opportunity to win her battle with her husband and at long last kill John.

[25] *And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist.*

[26] *And the king was **exceeding[ly]** sorry;*

yet for his oath's sake,

and for the[] sakes [of those] which sat with him,

he would not reject her.

[27] *And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and*

*he went and beheaded him in the prison,
[28] And brought his head in a charger,
and gave it to the damsel:
and the damsel gave it to her mother.
[29] And when his [that is John's] disciples heard of it,
they came and took up his corpse,
and laid it in a tomb.*

Matthew 14 adds:

[12] ..., and went and told Jesus.

What a sad and tender moment that must have been for John's loyal disciples.

So there we have John decreasing to the ultimate. John was executed.

We'll have to stop there for now and pick up here after the seasonal messages. But before we go, let's apply what we've learned with a closing story.

Application

The year was 2011. My nephew, Drew, at age thirty, contracted tongue cancer. He knew the Lord, was bright, had a family, a good job, and a zest for living. He fought mightily for his life with aggressive surgical, radiation, and drug intervention. But at age thirty-two, he passed away. Drew's suffering had ended. After his two-and-a-half year battle, he finally beat his cancer and was at peace.

The paradox is that death for a Christian brings life and peace. The promise that Drew claims is new life with a perfect body. As I told him during his struggle, both John the Baptist and Jesus finished their mission at the prime of life. Drew passed on in good company.

Jesus said referring to taking up our cross and following Him:
Matthew 16

*[25] For whosoever will save his life shall lose it:
and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*

Jesus gave us a paradoxical truth to teach us the way. John faithfully performed God's assignment for him. As a result, he was thrown into prison and **ultimately executed**. He lost his life, but his **mission was over**.

God took him to be with Him in his early thirties. While having his life snuffed out at his prime sounds tragic from an earthly perspective, John accomplished his task, was freed from prison, had a quick and virtually painless death, and gained a better life in glory. Now the light of his life shines on for all to see.

Romans 12

[1] I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God,

John gave us a beautiful example as to how that looks. Each of us too must lose our life in the Lord if we are ever to find it.

Benediction

*Unto him that loved us,
and washed us from our sins in his own blood,
And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father;
to him be glory and dominion
for ever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:5b-6)*

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