

“The G.O.A.T.” (part 1)

Luke 3:1-38

In every field, there is someone who is referred to as ‘The G.O.A.T.’—the greatest of all time. The Super Bowl is tonight, and much to everyone’s surprise, the New England Patriots are playing...yeah, right. It’s their 11th super bowl, and their third straight. (We’re all Rams fans tonight...) Sports analysts and commentators refer to their quarterback, Tom Brady, as the “goat.” In the world of professional basketball, debate persists as to whether LeBron James or Michael Jordan is the goat. LeBron recently said that winning the 2016 NBA Finals made him the greatest player of all time. (He’s a real humble guy...)

I’m certainly aware that there are many Christian pro athletes, actors, and entertainers. And we’re grateful for how they use their platform. In many ways our generation is lacking for role models who are truly great. To be sure, there are plenty of losers posing as winners. God’s definition of greatness is vastly different from the world’s.

Who is the goat? It’s not who you think. It’s a real head scratcher, to be perfectly honest. Someone unexpected.

Enter the life of John the Baptist. Jesus made a powerful statement about his life in Luke 7:28—“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.” Anyone that Jesus calls ‘great’ is someone whose life we need to pay close attention to.

Jesus had nothing but sterling remarks for John and the way that he lived his life. He was strange and far from the ordinary. His ministry and manner of life were so odd that it got the attention of his generation. Of course, this was by design, because God wanted to show them what they needed to do to **receive Christ**.

And that is a very good question, isn't it? What must I do to receive salvation? Is there a certain level of morality that I must obtain, or a certain amount that I have to pray and go to church? And if so, how do I know how much is enough? Is salvation by birthright or a matter of pedigree? John points us to the answer to all of these questions

John signified the end of the Old Covenant and the arrival of the New. The purpose of his life and ministry was to announce the arrival of Christ, the very One of whom Moses in the law and all the prophets did write. John's life pointed others to Jesus Christ as the hope of salvation.

What's the secret of true greatness? It depends on who you ask. Looks? Followers? Talent? Money? Success?

By those standards, the world would classify John as a loser and a failure. He was isolated. He lived his whole life and spent his entire ministry in a remote, out of the way area. His ministry was brief. He was imprisoned for a year, and at the end of that year his head was removed from his body.

By the world's standards, John was unsuccessful.

Charles Swindoll—*“Imagine you are the chairperson of a steering committee for a new ministry, and someone from the ‘Build-n-Grow’ ministry marketing firm outlines the following plan of action based on five governing rules:*

1. *Don't go to where the people are; make them come to you. And should they come, don't provide seating; make them stand. Don't build a building; meet outside.*
2. *Dress unattractively. Avoid the latest trends. In fact, look weird on purpose.*

3. *Speak offensively. Insult your listeners and verbally assault your opponents. Use harsh, condemning words. Call your detractors names, like 'snakes' and 'hypocrites.'*
4. *Rail against high-ranking officials who don't have integrity. Point out their lies and expose their double standards publicly. Don't hedge your words. Expose their sin and call them sinners.*
5. *Encourage your followers to follow a worthier leader. in fact, admit your utter unworthiness by comparison*

Now more than likely, you're not going to call that a recipe for success. Yet it is a page ripped right out of John the Baptist's playbook. And Jesus said that of all those who are born of women, none is greater than John. Goat!

And so there is much that we can learn from a careful look at the life of John the Baptist. His unique life pointed others to Christ, he explained to them the way of salvation, and all of us should desire the same thing. I want to take the next two weeks and look at John's life under the microscope. As we do, we'll look at his character and background, his ministry, and the overall purpose that he served as the one whom heaven chose to announce the arrival of God's Messiah.

1. The MAN that John was (3:1-2)

It is impossible to separate John from the times in which he lived and preached. He was indeed a man for such a time. You will notice that Luke establishes the context of John's life and ministry in the first verse of chapter three. He will begin by mentioning the most powerful ruler in the world at that time and then work his way down the chain of command. It would kind of be like starting out with the president, the governor of NC, and the mayor. As the meticulous historian that

he was, Luke is providing us with historical context. By giving us this information, Luke is also telling us something important about John as a man.

Against the backdrop of the day, John's life stood out in stark contrast. If ever there was one, here was a man who truly cut against the cultural grain. His ministry was during a time of political fracturing in Israel. Various groups were vying for power and influence. Even the priesthood had become corrupted by lust for money and control.

When John first stepped onto the scene, Tiberius had succeeded Augustus as Rome's emperor. In the region of Judea, Herod the Great had died and Rome divided up his territory among his three sons—Archelaus (Judea and Samaria), Antipas (Galilee), and Philip (area north and east of the Sea of Galilee). It wasn't very long before Archelaus was deposed and exiled by Rome, who then put their own governor in his place. You and I know him as Pontius Pilate.

Notice that Luke also mentions both Annas and Caiaphas when he refers to the high priesthood of the temple. These too had been put in place by Rome. Annas was first, then his son-in-law. The priesthood had become a political cess pool, and they had turned it into a means of gaining wealth and power for themselves.

While all of this was going on—the political upheaval and religious compromise—people longed for a true leader.

Some time ago, I was fascinated by a book that was written by Eric Metaxes called "*Seven Men: And the Secret of Their Greatness*." It is essentially seven short biographies of some of the most influential men from history. Each of the men he writes about were surrendered to a purpose that was greater than themselves. One of the men that he writes about in the book is William Wilberforce, a man who gave up an opportunity to be the prime minister of

England for a cause that to him was far greater than becoming the leader of the world's greatest empire.

Wilberforce gave up his life for the sake of slaves and the abolitionist movement. He was a man who realized that everything he had been given was ultimately a gift to be used for the glory of God and the welfare of others.

In the introduction of the book, Metaxes makes the case that manhood has fallen on hard times in our society.

Eric Metaxes — *“In a world where authority is questioned and in which our appreciation of real leadership and especially fatherhood has been badly damaged...the idea of manhood itself has become profoundly confused. And as a result of this, instead of God’s idea of authentic manhood, we’ve ended up with two very distorted ideas about manhood.”*

He says that the first idea is this ‘macho’ man who uses his strength to be domineering and to bully those who are weaker. This is the guy who hasn't grown up emotionally, who might be a man on the outside, but on the inside he remains a selfish and insecure little boy. He doesn't understand the meaning of responsibility and sacrifice. This is not God's idea of what a man ought to be.

If the first false idea is that a man has to be macho, then the second idea is polar opposite. It is the ‘emasculated’ man who runs from his responsibility. Neither is this God's idea of what a man ought to be.

The faithful in Israel desperately wanted godly leadership but could not find it on the throne nor in the temple. So when a bold and fearless prophet appears on the scene with God's Word on his lips and not a hint of corruption in his life, people begin to pay attention.

The portrait that we are given of John the Baptist is not a macho portrait, but neither is it one that is emasculated. He is a man's man, but he is also God's man. He is a man who has surrendered himself to a higher purpose.

What do we know about his life from the Scripture? Some things worth mentioning:

He fulfilled a SPECIFIC promise

If you go back to chapter 1, you'll remember that John was born to a priest named Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth who were described as being both "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Both of them were known for their godly lives. They were godly people who had lived blamelessly before God and others, but they also knew the depths of suffering and personal pain:

Luke 1:7—“But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.”

Throughout their years, they had longed for a child and prayed that God would allow them to conceive, but for whatever reason, God had not allowed it up until this point.

That's because God always works in His own timing and in His own way. He had a specific purpose for them which He makes known to them at the right time. God's will involved giving them a son in their old age. (What about me?)

George Muller, “How to Ascertain the Will of God”

1—I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's Will,

whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.

2—Having done this, I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impression. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions.

3—I seek the will of the Spirit of God in connection with the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Ghost guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.

4—Next, I take into account providential circumstances. These often plainly indicate God's Will in connection with His Word and Spirit.

5—I ask God in prayer to reveal His Will to me aright.

6—Thus, through prayer to God, the study of the Word, and reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly. In trivial matters, and in transactions involving most important issues, I have found this method always effective.

You'll remember that Luke goes on to tell of how Zachariah was performing his priestly duties in the temple one day when an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. Such a sight caused him to be troubled and fear fell upon him:

Luke 1:13-17—“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John...”

The angel goes on to mention several things that would be true about their son:

Luke 1:14-17—“...And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.””

John’s life fulfilled a specific promise. He was an answer to the prayers of his righteous parents. John would mark a turning point in redemptive history. He wouldn’t be the Savior, but he would be the one who would serve as His forerunner. The angel tells Zechariah that several things would be true of John’s life:

- He will be a cause for rejoicing (v. 14)
- He will be great before the Lord (v. 15a)
- He will not drink wine or strong drink (v. 15b)
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 15c)
- He will turn many to the Lord (v. 16)
- He will go before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah (v. 17)

He served a SPECIAL purpose

Heaven had its own special purpose for John’s life. The Old Testament had promised that one would come and pave the way for the Messiah’s entry into the world. This person would serve as the forerunner of Christ.

Down in verse 4, Luke references the prophet Isaiah and links John's life to fulfillment of prophecy:

Isaiah 40:3-5—“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

Prophetically, the Scriptures foretold of one who come and cry out in the wilderness, calling on people to prepare for the coming King.

Malachi 3:1 —“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,’ says the Lord of hosts.”

In ancient times, it was common for a ‘herald’ to precede the arrival of a king, to announce the king's coming and to prepare for his safe travel. With an entourage of servants, the herald would make sure that the roadway was smooth and uncluttered. Holes would be filled, rocks and debris would be removed, and any trash would be burned or hidden. As the group traveled along and worked, the herald would proclaim the king's coming to everyone he encountered.

The purpose of a herald was to proclaim the King's coming as well as to call on others to prepare for the King's coming. This was the sole purpose of John's life.

In the first century, many of the Jews were looking for the reappearance of the prophet Elijah because of what the prophet Malachi had said in the final promise of the Old Testament:

Malachi 4:5-6—“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

These are the last words of the Old Testament. It would be 400 years before another prophetic voice would be raised in Israel. When John stepped onto the scene, he would be that prophetic voice that Israel needed to hear.

Jesus said of John that he was the “Elijah” which was to come. He would come in the spirit and power of Elijah:

Matthew 11:13-14—“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.”

In a spiritual sense, John was the “Elijah” that they had been looking for to come, for he came in the spirit and power of Elijah. He even dressed as Elijah did and preached the same message as Elijah.

In many ways, John’s life was parallel to Elijah’s life:

- he preached in a climate of dryness
- people were in a place of neutrality
- a wicked king was ruling

Like Elijah, John was a prophet who was calling the people back to God after there had been a long draught.

He lived a SEPARATE life

John knew what his purpose was, and he kept his life clean. He kept his life free from clutter. Instead of being like the world around him, he lived a separated life of personal holiness. He was consecrated as a Nazarite from birth, one who was holy and set apart for a special use by the Lord. We see John's separation illustrated:

- in the place where he LIVED

Luke 2:80—“So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.”

Matthew's account says that he could be found preaching in the wilderness. He was not to be found in the palace, nor was he to be found in the city square. He didn't walk the halls of the schools of higher learning, or sit down at the table with men of means. John carried out his ministry in an unlikely place—the wilderness.

The way we live as Christ followers ought to be different than the way the world around us lives. We live with a different set of priorities, values, and a different purpose. Our life should stand out in this way.

- in the way that he LOOKED

Though Luke doesn't mention John's appearance here, the account in both Matthew and Mark does. He was strange!

Matthew 3:4—“Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.”

Mark 1:6—“Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.”

Let me tell you, Willy Robertson and the Duck Dynasty clan don’t come close to old “Johnny B.” John wasn’t afraid to be different. He stood out in a crowd. This was intentional, because he looked, sounded, and acted totally different than the other religious leaders that the people had grown accustomed to hearing.

While the Pharisees and others dressed in the finest linens from the local Jerusalem Neiman Marcus, John wore a camel hair coat. While the Pharisees and others ate the most sumptuous of foods, John had bugs and honey for breakfast.

He was intentionally shocking. He didn’t dress to impress. His life was tailor made to provoke their thinking and stop people dead in their tracks and to get them truly thinking about spiritual matters. How do we get others’ attention?

- in the One whom he LIFTED UP

John pointed others to Jesus. The purpose of his life was not to point people to himself. As the Lord’s messenger, he lived his life for an audience of One:

John 1:27—“It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”

John 1:29—“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”

John’s humble attitude is reflected further:

John 3:26-30—“And they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He

is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!’ John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.’”

John willingly got out of the way so that Jesus could be in the spotlight. That is the secret of his greatness. True greatness isn’t a matter of accomplishments, possessions, or your appearance. It’s a matter of your heart and the posture that your life takes toward God. When you consider the motive of his life, can you begin to see why Jesus would call him ‘the goat?’

Two questions come to mind as I close:

- ***Am I fulfilling the purpose of God for my life?***

Whether you are a man or woman, young or old, are you someone who is surrendered to a purpose that is greater than yourself? You’ll discover that purpose only through turning from your sin in repentance and trusting Christ as your Savior.

Without apology, I want to tell you that the very first step to discovering God’s will for your life is a personal relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ. You can’t even begin to know the will of God until you are first in the family of God.

- ***Am I pointing others to Christ with my life?***

Who’s the hero in the story of your life? For John, it was all about Jesus. It was John who said, “I must decrease, but He must increase.” What about you?