

It doesn't matter what kind of sermons we bring you. It doesn't matter what we preach unless we stand up here and speak for 12 years without stopping... and then we'd leave something out. You cannot get a complete picture of the Christian experience. Something is going to surprise you, and it may shake your faith in the process. I want to say a word about that. Maybe there's someone here for whom this is a very timely word, but I can assure you, if it is not... hold your breath... wait a while... it will be.

Can I tell you a story? I think I'll start with a story. Is that alright?

It's Capernaum. It's the square near the front of a house. Hundreds, even thousands, of people are pressed around the Lord. There are women with their sick children. There are old men, infirm. There's a young man with a withered hand. There are three or four standing there with blind eyes. And some are even there... hoping that they can get his attention, have him come to their home, because someone in their family has died. Every once in a while, there's a hallelujah or a "Blessed be the God of Israel" as incredible healings and deliverances take place.

But out in the back of the crowd, cutting through the crowd, come two men. Now Peter and John noticed these men and recognized them because they had once been their friends and close companions. They were once even followers of the same man that these people are following. John and Peter know them as two of the outstanding disciples of John the Baptist. And they say to Peter and to John in a whisper, "We have just come from John's prison. He has asked us to talk to your teacher, and we would like to see him for a moment."

This is important. John and Peter go up to the Lord and whisper in his ear, and immediately, instantly, the Lord drops everything and dismisses the crowd. He knows that this is important. And, brothers and sisters, it's not only important but also probably one of the most difficult moments Jesus Christ ever experienced during his sojourn on this earth. What he has to do in the next few minutes as a man and as God is extremely difficult...perhaps one of the most difficult things He's ever had to do, be it His nature as man or His nature as God.

The crowd is dismissed. The Lord Jesus sits down with the two disciples of John, who have just come from Herod's prison, where John is in a dungeon. And John has a question. Now, brothers and sisters, if John the Baptist can have a question, I think you... could have a question about the ways of God. The two men, almost embarrassed, say to the Lord, Lord, teacher, your cousin John has a question. And the question is, "Are you the Messiah? Are you the 'coming one'? Or shall we look for another?"

Now, please engage with me for a moment in a little of this being free of time and space. God has lived in every moment of this little segment we call time. He's free of it. Therefore, he can break in on it at any place. He is the Alpha and the Omega. And at this moment, the living Father, the God of creation of heaven and earth, is located somewhere. He's located in the bosom

of Jesus Christ. As sure as you know an indwelling Christ, He knew an indwelling Father. Do you understand? And their meshing was so complete that this God, free of time, was so much one with His Son that there were times when the Son could also see that which had been and that which would be.

Do you remember when He said, "Before Abraham was, I am." I am there and here and here and here and there and there. He had enormous recollections of things past, things present, and things future. It's even possible, dear sister, dear brother, that at this propitious hour He might even have thought...of you, because He is faced with a serious dilemma, a dilemma unique to God.

It is so personal this time. It's not the first time anyone has ever come up to Him as God in their prayers to heaven, or to Him while He was here on earth, or since He ascended. It's not the first time someone came up and asked a question about the ways of God, but this is the first time it's ever come so close to home, because this time it's His cousin. He grew up with this boy. They played in the streets of Nazareth together.

He knew that God the Father had demanded of this particular man perhaps more than He had ever demanded of any of us or anyone else. And this one, if anybody deserves a straight answer from God about the ways of God, this man has earned the right to a good, clear-cut answer. John the Baptist, of whom no man has ever been born greater, is in prison. He senses he's going to His death. The Lord knows he's going to his death. He's his own cousin. He wants an answer...and I think the Lord wants to give him an answer. But John the Baptist is not free of time and space, and neither am I. And sometimes... it is impossible for Him to give an answer. Sometimes it is impossible for Him to give an answer. On the other hand, He knows how desperately we need an answer.

Right now, John the Baptist is having a problem that is not peculiar to himself. John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, is having doubts because the Lord is not living up to John's expectations. God is not performing the way God is supposed to perform. John had an understanding of what God was going to do. He was really clear. We're talking about a man who had audibly heard the voice of God on numerous occasions. If anybody had a right to expect to understand what God was like and what God was doing, it was John the Baptist. And John is confused because the Lord is not living up to his expectations.

There are several sons of John the Baptist...and here's one of them (points to himself). And I have a notion there are one or two out here somewhere. He will not always do what you expect him to do. He won't even do what he promises to do sometimes. Oh, Gene, that's heresy. I know it's heresy, but it's true nonetheless. You and I get a certain impression of what God is like, all these sermons these Baptist preachers preach to you, and then one day God steps out of that mold and does not perform that way, and the world begins coming down on you.

I'm gonna say this to you again. It would be really good to have some answers, but folks, I'm going to tell you something. John's not going to get them, and if a man could deserve answers from God, if he could earn them from God, it would be John.

I want you to go back, just for a moment, to John's life. He's eight years old. He looks up to his mother, Elizabeth, and says, "Mother, God has spoken to me. Never put a razor to my hair. I have been called to be a Nazarene." Now that would befuddle any mother...except Elizabeth, because she remembers his incredibly inordinate conception and birth. Angels had something to do with John's birth. His daddy was struck dumb. He got a strange name that no one was familiar with.

At the age of 14, he comes to his mother, and he says, "Mother, God has spoken to me, and I am to leave home, and I am to go and live in the wilderness for the rest of my life until God tells me otherwise. I will go there and live among the caves, and I will pray, fast, and wait on God. I will live as do the hermits there, the Essenes, and others, and I will wait, for God has something to tell me."

Elizabeth consented to it because she had given that child to God before the child was conceived, and she knew He had some ordination in his life. By the time John had reached 30, his skin was bronzed and as hard as leather. He has spent most of his life in prayer, fasting, and seeking the face of God. He has been eating things that are unclean by Jewish law. He eats locusts, and he wears something unclean - camel's hair. He's a somber, sober, serious human being.

One day again, God speaks to this man who has lived this austere life for God. And God says to him, "Go and preach repentance to Israel and baptize them. But do it in the desert. If anybody wants to hear you, they're going to have to come to you. Don't go to the marketplace. Don't go to the cities. Don't go to the villages. Don't even go into the pasture lands. Go out into the hot, steaming desert."

And there, where temperatures can reach 170, John the Baptist begins to thunder out God's proclamation to caravans passing by. Word of the strange creature reaches into the villages, into the small towns, and the people come out because they are seeking. It's an ordinary generation that normally would have never even listened to the voice of God, but John literally takes it and changes and turns that generation to be the generation of all generations.

And the people come first in dribbles, then in hundreds, then in thousands, then in tens of thousands. First from a mile, then five miles, then twenty miles, then fifty miles. Some people trek for days to hear this man preach, and they repent, and their souls are shredded. There are men who follow him. They, too, live austerely, and John begins to gather around him hundreds of disciples who are waiting for him to give a clear word about the coming of a Messiah.

Then one day, John, totally to his surprise, having been told by God that something light and fluttering would be coming down, looking something like a dove, would go over the massive crowd and rest on someone. It does one day, and lo and behold, it's his cousin. He is amazed.

This is the man... who is the man that no one ever born of a woman stands higher, and it is the same man to whom God spoke one day and said, "John, Herod the Tetrarch is living in sin. You proclaim my righteous anger against this incestuous sin. Consider not the possibilities of the risk." And John thunders out indignation against Herod.

One day, the crowds are broken up, the soldiers come in, John is chained, and he is dragged off. He's taken to the palace that sits on a high cliff, and then down some precarious steps deep into the bowels of the earth, and he is thrown into a pit. And there he lives, chained with his feet in slimy water, fungi growing on the wall, yeast-smelling air. There he sits, and there he rots. Eventually, some of his disciples are allowed to come to him, and they begin telling him what his cousin's doing.

Do you know what his cousin's doing? Do you know what his cousin is doing? Well, it's shocking what his cousin is doing, and it's not what John expected. When John started preaching, word got out that anybody living that severely and fasting that much and praying that much, someone like that had to have a demon. "John's got a demon" was the word of the Pharisees.

Then he announces the Messiah, and John expects...he expects...the Messiah to be like him, sober, somber, and austere. And what's Jesus doing? He's getting a reputation, too. You know what his reputation is? He eats too much, and he drinks too much. Did you know that? Jesus is a glutton and a drunk. Excuse me, but that's wonderful. That's really wonderful. I think it's glorious that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came from the heavens, became a man, and enjoyed being human. That should encourage you.

But to keep the gospel in line, I want to tell you something. Don't get too encouraged. You know, I am not here preaching a prosperity gospel to you. Do you know what the Christian life contains for you? It contains for you everything it contained for Jesus Christ, because He was the first Christian. A lot of joy, a lot of feasting, banqueting, glory, awe, ridicule, Gethsemane, crucifixion, abandonment by God. Abandoned by God. Death...and resurrection. That's what the Christian life holds for you. It's buried. And, by the way, after resurrection, more eating and drinking, and rejoicing. Say Praise the Lord to that, would you?

The disciples talk to John the Baptist, and they don't hear anything. He doesn't hear anything that they're telling him that encourages him. He was so clear in his direction. Jesus seems to be meandering around here. His direction is not clear, according to John. John is in prison. He's about to be killed, he thinks, and he's correct. And his God is not what he thought he would be. John thought he would see Israel's kingdom restored. He thought he was going to see the Son of God on a throne. He thought he was going to see Rome put down. He thought he was going to

see the true religion of God reestablished in vitality. And all he sees is a slimy wall and two walls upon his arms, and reports that his cousin is feasting where he fasted and revering where he prayed. And John...John wants some answers.

Well, two grief-stricken disciples of John look Jesus straight in the face and say, "Lord, what's your answer?" And I think time and space began to slip now...away. The Lord Jesus interfaces with the Father, and God remembers how many times His children have wanted an answer to an inexplicable God and to the surprises, the unexpectedness, and the disappointments of God.

Israel was in captivity for 400 years, praying every day for deliverance, and not one time in 400 years did God give an answer to a prayer, and not once did He explain why. Job on a dunghill, begging God for clear answers, and God not giving one. Instead, he talks about crocodiles. Israel in Babylon, under the yoke of the Babylonians, crying out to God for deliverance, and for 70 years, not one piece of evidence that He'll take them out of slavery.

But let's get this a little closer to home. Perhaps a rabbi, well-trained and faithful to God, back there somewhere in the Old Testament era, is captured by the Greeks, led off to slavery, and spends the rest of his life emptying dung out of a stable. A brilliant man reduced to slavery, and he looks up to God, and he says, "Why? Explain this. This is not what I expected of you."

A child raped, and a mother wants to know in the face of God, "Why?" A baby born still, and a face looks up to God and says, "Lord, explain. This is not what I expected you to be." Listen. This is hurting Jesus. In all the times past, He did not give a clear answer to people who had to have clear answers. But today, He's going to have to be an immutable God, even to his cousin from whom He has demanded everything and is now about to demand his life.

You see, John has never read Matthew, Mark, Luke, the gospel of John, and Acts. He doesn't know what's going to happen. I read it. I know. Why won't the Lord answer John the Baptist? He's got a right to know. Lord, just once, would you please give one good, clear, straight answer? If ever, give one now. Give his answer, Lord. I'll help you phrase it. Look at the disciples of John the Baptist and say, "He's been so faithful, I'll tell him what's going to happen. I'm going to preach to more people. Hundreds and thousands are going to believe. I'm going to Jerusalem in triumph. I am going to be crucified, but I'm going to rise from the dead and bring in the kingdom and ascend to my father on high. John, you won't see it, but that's what's going to happen."

Now, that's a good Western answer, isn't it? Good Aristotelian answer. Good, clear, crisp words you can understand. Why won't this immutable God explain himself to John at least once? Do you know the answer to that? And neither do I. I will die not knowing, and so will you. He has never given one hint as to why He will not answer. And at best, we can only speculate. Brothers and sisters, the question before the house this morning is not whether He'll give you a clear

answer. The question is, are you going to continue to follow a God you don't understand? And a God who will not live up to your expectations. Will you?

You'll face that decision, every one of you, right soon. You will be in John's shoes. Are you going to follow a God who won't explain the great tragedies of your life, won't give you any answers, and will utterly disappoint you in the things He does?

Just look at what the Lord says right now that proves the point. He says to them, He gives them three answers that are, to me, totally worthless. I don't know about you, but they're worthless. John knows all of this. He knows everything he's about to be told. Number one, tell Him that many are being healed. Many demons are being cast out. The lame walk, the blind see, and the demons are cast out. Many evil spirits were cast out. Many blind see. Many lame walk. Isn't that wonderful? Say amen.

It's not wonderful to everybody. You know why? Because many isn't all. Many isn't all.

That very day, when he dismissed that crowd and sent them home, the next day before daylight, he left and went to another town. There were people in that city who had children with withered hands, and those hands were never healed, and the mother had to look at that child as it went through adulthood. And that adult had to look at that hand and go into old age, wondering throughout his whole life: why did the Lord Jesus dismiss that crowd? Why didn't he heal me that night? There were mothers who took sick babies home that night, who in a few days later died, and they had to look into the face of an inexplicable God and wonder why. Many were healed, but *not all*.

That didn't help John.

How about the second one? The gospel of the kingdom is being proclaimed. John knew that. He had proclaimed it himself. He had seen many repent, and he knew the Lord was. Wherein was comfort in that? Where was a straight answer in that? There wasn't any.

And now the Lord gives the third answer, and it is just as unencouraging as the other two, if not more so. Listen to His words. The demons are cast out. The lame walk, the blind see, the gospel is preached. *And blessed is he who is not offended with Me.* And blessed is *she* who is not offended with me.

I get a little frightened when I meet someone who is very, very easily offended with other people. Listen, if you can be offended by other people, you don't stand a prayer. Wait until you meet God...Now, there's somebody who knows how to offend. And if you get offended with God, wherein is your hope? *But I want a clear answer.* You won't get one. And blessed is he who is not offended with me.

In the cell next to John's dungeon and pit is another man. This man was wealthy. Herod wanted his wealth, came in and arrested him, threw him in prison on false charges, and stripped him of all of his goods. He was going to keep him there until he rots. And if you walk down there to visit John the Baptist, there's this man in the cell next to him ranting and raving against Herod. Herod's a big stink. Herod's a this and this. I hate him. If I could get out of here, I'd kill him.

Well, Herod arrested that fellow. Did Herod arrest John the Baptist? Herod put that one in prison. Did he put John the Baptist in prison? Say yes. Prove to me you're still awake. This man is offended with Herod. Excuse me, brothers and sisters, but open your eyes. That man is not offended with Herod. He thinks he is. His offense is with the living God. Some of you have been hurt by men and by movements, and you've received unjust treatment, and you're offended with people, a person, and a pain inside eats like a worm. No, you are not offended with another man, nor a movement, nor a woman, nor any cause. Your offense ultimately and only is with God.

Who put John the Baptist in prison? It was not Herod...and John knew it. Do you know it? Do you know who put John the Baptist in prison? Your Lord put John the Baptist in prison. Well, Gene, that's terrible. Of course, He wouldn't do that. Ask John the Baptist. John knows that it is the sovereign hand of God that has allowed him to be there. You can blame men, but if you raise the backdrop of the stage, you may find something spiritual there. And if you raise that backdrop and that curtain, you might find something else. But raise another one, the last one, you'll find your Lord, the very God whom you love and worship. Your offense is not with man. Your offense is with your Lord. And ultimately, you've got to do business where John the Baptist did business. You've got to do business with the Lord over that enormous pain that's been inflicted on your soul.

The Lord Jesus is hurting right now. If there were anybody He could ever give a straight answer to, it would be his cousin. Listen, John the Baptist is the closest to a spiritual equal Jesus Christ will ever know. The one person who would have ears to understand, and your Lord didn't answer him, and never forget it. All He said was, *Blessed are you...if you're not offended with Me.*

John, when you're 14 years old, go live in the desert and grow up there alone and lonely. Never know the love of a wife, or the joy of fatherhood. You've been called to my work. You'll have none of that. You will live in austerity. And blessed are you, John, if you're not offended.

John, go preach in the desert until they come to you, and stand there in the broiling sun and preach and preach again and gather the multitudes to you. Spend your days and your nights counseling them until you're weary and tired. And John, know that you may never see the ends of my calling in your life. *And blessed are you if you're not offended with Me.*

John, stand there in front of 20,000 people who are following you. Baptize my son, and know that before this day is over, 10,000 of them will leave you as I purpose, and they will follow him. And tomorrow, John, the other 10,000 will be gone, and all of your work and all of your fruit

will go to another man who will not labor for them. They will be his as a gift...and you will lose them all. And all of your life's work will be gone. *And blessed are you if you're not offended with Me.*

Go and preach to Herod and know the consequences. Feel the shackles upon your feet and hands. Be thrown into that dungeon, knowing you will never know what will take place. That all the dreams you had, the very things that were the engine of your enthusiasm, your willingness to sacrifice, that you might see the glory of the coming Lord, you will see nothing, and you will know nothing. *And blessed are you if you're not offended with Me.*

Today, your head was purchased by an obscene dance. They're coming to take your life, John. What an ignominious way to go. *And blessed are you, John, if you're not offended with Me.*

A rope is cast into the dungeon. John is hauled out of the pit. He makes his way up the precarious steps of the cliff and finally to the courtyard of Herod's splendid palace. The gates of the courtyard opened. Blessed are you, John, if you're not offended with me. Kneel. Blessed are you, John, if you're not offended with me. The blade rises to the sky. Blessed are you, John, if you are not offended with me. In a moment, life will go blank. You will never know whether you have lived for purpose or died in vain, nor will you know who or where, nor when shall come the Messiah, if ever. *And blessed are you, John, if you are not offended with me.*

Death is at your side...and life is now ended, and your questions are going unanswered. And blessed are you, if you are not offended with such a God...