

## Ministry Lessons from John the Baptist

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Key verses: Luke 1:80; Luke 3:16; Luke 7:19\*

Christian ministry often comes to us in seasons. There are seasons when we experience tremendous fruitfulness and seasons when we feel as if nothing is happening. Learning to navigate those seasons—and learning to remain faithful in every season of ministry—is a crucial skill for success in ministry.

I want to talk about the seasons of ministry and to look at them in terms of “lights,” specifically, the first light, the highlight, and the twilight.

These are not necessarily sequential seasons, but rather seasons that come and go with the ebb and flow of our lives as we follow Jesus and discern the ways that He is leading us. In other words, you may identify on this day with the second of these seasons, and next month find yourself identifying with the first season. Understanding the nature of the various seasons we go through, is essential to long-term ministry effectiveness.

To illustrate these seasons we will look at three specific and probably the most significant experiences from the ministry and life of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Luke.

### 1. The first light of ministry

The first light of ministry is a time of awakenings—discovering (or rediscovering) the love of God and responding, and discovering (or rediscovering) that God has a plan for your life.

**Luke 1:80** And the child grew and became strong in Spirit; **and he lived in the desert** until he appeared publicly to Israel.

This verse points out two main things John experienced: maturity and obscurity. These two things go together, one feeding and nourishing the other.

**This season grows our faith.** For John at this time, the future was nothing more than a vague idea of calling and purpose. John’s parents were given a clear indication that he would grow up to fulfill the role of a prophet in Israel: “he will be great in the sight of the Lord, . . . many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God . . . he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk 1:15-16)

When we think of the hand of God upon a person’s life, the first word that comes to our mind usually is not “obscurity.” When we think of the hand of God being upon someone, we think in terms of a popular and far-reaching work that perhaps they direct. We think of a large church, we think of television shows, radio programs, books, podcasts and DVDs, and great influence. But we almost never think of obscurity.

What we see in the very beginning for John the Baptist, however, is not a season of fame and fortune, but a season of obscurity. A season of hiddenness. A man with a divine calling, living in the desert in utter obscurity. Yet no one could deny that God’s hand was on this man.

\*All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible Updated Edition, 1995, unless otherwise indicated.

What do we do when we find ourselves in a season of obscurity? What do we do when we find ourselves in a season, not of spotlights, but of development and growth and waiting and maturing to become what God would have us become?

What we need to develop and cultivate more than anything else during a first light season, is a sense of utter and total dependence on God. How do we do that? We need two things: to have heard the voice of God, and total trust in God concerning the destination to which He is bringing us, however uncertain that destination may be.

Let me give you an example from Scripture to illustrate:

Think of Abraham in the Old Testament. Abram, when he was called in Genesis 12, was called not to a place so much as to a Person, to a relationship with the One who called him:

**Gen. 12:1** – Now the LORD said to Abram,  
“Go forth from your country,  
And from your relatives  
And from your father’s house,  
To the land which I will show you;  
**2** And I will make you a great nation,  
And I will bless you,  
And make your name great;  
And so you shall be a blessing;  
**3** And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Scottish minister Alexander McClaren talks about the call of Abraham, and how Abram actually stepped out in faith and embarked on a very vague sense of God’s calling to leave his home and to trust God for the rest of the plan as he went. This is what McClaren says:

We have to be sure that the mountain peak far ahead, with the sunshine bathing it, is not delusive cloud but solid reality, and we have to make sure that God has bid us step out on the yard of path which we *can* see, and, having secured these two certainties, we are to cast ourselves into the **obscurity** before us, and to bear in our hearts the vision of the end, to cheer us amid the difficulties of the road.

In other words, you have to embrace the obscurity because you trust in God’s provision and plans, and because you trust in Him. Most of us ruin our time in the desert because we can’t stand the notion of obscurity. We do whatever we can to try to create significance and meaning and make a name for ourselves. But John the Baptist embraced the obscurity. How do we know that? Because we see that later that obscurity became the defining essence of his ministry. When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, he is described according to the words of Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord” (Lk 3:4).

He couldn’t be the voice of one calling in the desert unless he had spent time in the desert. Neither can you or I become the person God has called us to be if we neglect our time of obscurity, if we neglect our time in the desert. The time of obscurity may be the most important time of your journey in following Jesus. As the prophet said, “Do not despise the day of small things.”

Those who don't embrace the first light, who aren't willing to spend a season in obscurity, often do not experience a highlight season.

## 2. The highlight of ministry

We sometimes think, wrongly, I would add, that the highlight of our calling will be when others recognize our significance and importance. We want to be recognized, we want significance, we want people to tell us that we've done a nice job. We want to be patted on the back and celebrated. Because that is what our culture tells us— that the measure of success is public recognition.

If that is how Jesus measures our success, then Luke 3:7 would have been the highlight of John's ministry: "John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, 'you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'"

This would have been the highlight of his calling because people were flocking to his ministry, gathering to hear him preach. (If you want a preacher who tells you only what you want to hear, then you don't truly want to hear from God—you want to hear from yourself!).

But no. The highlight of John the Baptist's calling was not when the crowds were coming to him in droves. The highlight of his ministry was this:

**Luke 3:16** "I will baptize you with water, but one more powerful than I will come, **the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.** He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

**The highlight of our calling is not measured by the size of the crowds we preach to. Rather the highlight is when the total effect of our life and ministry is to point others away from ourselves and point them toward Jesus.**

The best evidence that you have gotten off course in your calling to serve God and follow Jesus, is when things become all about you. When John said he was not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals—a duty performed exclusively by slaves—he was saying he was not even worthy to be Jesus' slave!

Every failure, every disappointment, every regret in our efforts to serve God flows from this issue: from trying to make our calling about us and not about Jesus. Our need for importance and our need for approval and our need for validation is what gives birth to almost every conflict we have, either in our private lives or in the church.

**Philippians 3:7-8** But whatever was to my profit **I** now **consider** loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, **I consider** everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake **I** have lost all things. **I consider** them rubbish, that **I** may gain Christ.

The only way we can reach this point of humility is to spend time in the desert. Only when we have embraced obscurity, and along with it humility, can we really know the joy of what God is doing in the lives of others.

Humility is the key to fully appreciating the highlight of our calling. If the highlight of our calling is about what God is doing on behalf of others, then without humility we will never know that particular joy.

Andrew Murray said this about humility:

Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord, where I can go in and shut the door, and kneel to my Father in secret, and am at peace as in a deep sea of calmness, when all around and above is trouble.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

**Humility** is to feel that we have no power of ourselves, but that it all cometh from God. **Humility** is to lean on our beloved, to believe that he has trodden the winepress alone, to lie on his bosom and slumber sweetly there, to exalt him, and think less than nothing of ourselves. It is in fact to annihilate self and to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as all in all.

If you are struggling to find a highlight experience in your efforts to follow Jesus, if you're not experiencing joy or satisfaction, then maybe it is because, at some point, it came to be all about you, instead of all about Jesus. The solution is not to engage in self-condemnation, but rather to start again to discover the joy of pointing people to Jesus.

### **3. The twilight of our calling**

For every one of us there comes a day when we question our calling and ask, "Did I really fulfill what God has called me to do? Did I correctly understand what God expected of me? Was I obedient? Does what I did matter at all? Will any of it be remembered?"

John the Baptist came to this point when, after the first light of his calling, and after the highlight of his calling, he found himself in the twilight of his calling. He was asking these very questions. He was in prison, and it's possible that he knew he would never get out. He was having a hard time reconciling that reality with Jesus' own public declaration in Luke 4 that He came to set the captives free.

What happens when our situation fails to meet our expectations? What do we do in ministry when our experience seem to depart from what God has promised?

**Luke 7:19** "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

John is asking, essentially, "Did I miss something? Was all this for nothing? The angel told my parents that I would be great. This is not my definition of greatness!"

I want to make a few points here. First, Kingdom greatness can never be measured by external circumstances. You cannot know the fruit of your calling this side of eternity. We deal not in tangibles, not in hard facts, but in faith—and faith is what? Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see.

Yes, we sometimes get to see those we've shared the gospel with come to Christ. Yes, we sometimes get to see the sick healed. Yes, we sometimes get to see lives changed and restored for the glory of God. But the vast majority of the work we do for Jesus is work for which we will never see the results. The point is this: **if you can trust God with your life, then you can trust Him with your labor!**

Consider this about the life of John the Baptist: Before he was even born, the angel said he would be great ("he will be great in the sight of the Lord" Lk 1:15). Then, after John sends his disciples to question Jesus, Jesus turns to His own disciples and says, "Among those born to women, there is none greater than John!" (Lk 7:28). John's whole life is hedged in at the front end and at the back end by a promise of greatness and a confirmation of greatness, and yet John thought that perhaps he had missed it. Why? Because by external standards, there is nothing great about being in prison. But Kingdom greatness can never be measured by external circumstances.

Blaine Scoggins of "Persecution Watch" says that those who are in prison for their faith around the world never ask for sympathy or prayers that they would be released. Rather, they ask for prayers that more would be saved through their testimony and that those who are persecuting them would be saved.

How does a person come to have such a noble faith? By passing time in the desert, time in utter and total dependence on God, and by allowing that time to flower and bloom into complete humility.

The second point I want to make that it is okay to have questions, but it is not okay to give up. When John sent to Jesus asking if He was really the One, Jesus sent back an answer: "Report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Lk 7:22). But then Jesus added, "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (v. 23).

If you have questions, take them to Jesus. Pour your heart out. Share your frustrations and your disappointments and your anxieties. But don't just walk away.

The twilight of our calling can be ruined if we look too hard for tangible signs of our success. These signs are not always there. Whatever you do, don't give up—and the God who is faithful will bring fruit out of your ministry.

In 1966 at the Berlin Congress on World Evangelism, Kyung Chik Han gave a sermon on the power of God's Spirit. In that sermon he told this story:

Robert J. Thomas, a Welshman, was a colporteur of the Scottish Bible Society that was working in China. He learned that the Korean language is based on Chinese and that the Korean intellectuals could read Chinese, so, despite his enormous responsibility of getting the Scriptures to the hundreds of millions in China, he determined to get God's truth to the Koreans as well. Accordingly he secured passage on an American schooner, the *General Sherman*, that was sailing for Pyeng Yang, the large city in the north on the Taw Tong River. As the vessel neared Pyeng Yang a bitter controversy arose with the native coast guard; the ship was burned and all the passengers were killed. The death of one passenger was most unusual, however, for as

this man staggered out of the water his arms were filled with books which he thrust into the hands of the Koreans who clubbed him to death. This is how the Bible first came to Korea in 1866.

In 1900, only about 1% of Korea was Christian. Today South Korea is about 30% Christian and is home to the largest Pentecostal church in the world. None of which would have been possible were it not for a Welshman by the name of Robert J. Thomas, whose primary objective, like that of John the Baptist, was to point people to Jesus. He never lived to see the fruit of his efforts, but great is his reward.

The solution, when we find ourselves in the twilight season, is to go back to the first light. To go back to the desert, to the time of obscurity and to the time of waiting, and trust that in the silence, God is at work, His calling is certain, and His provision is sure.