

## COMMENTARY ON JOHN

### LESSON NUMBER 10

**“ JOHN 1:22 *Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?* <sup>23</sup> *He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.* <sup>24</sup> *And they which were sent were of the Pharisees.*”**

..... John 1:22-24)

### **THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS**

#### INTRODUCTION

The entrance of the Savior into the world involved a lot of people. Moses and the Prophets foretold His coming (Deut 18;15,18; Acts 3:24). A holy angel announced the birth of Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist (Lk 1:5,13-21). A holy angel announced His birth (Lk 1:26-37). A godly woman was selected to be His mother (Lk 1:28). Her husband was a just man, and was also visited and directed by holy angels (Matt 1:19-20). Faithful shepherds received the first announcement (Lk 2:8-15). Wise men from the east saw His star, and came to worship Him (Matt 2:1-2). Godly Simeon was told He would not die until He had seen the Lord's Christ (Lk 2:25-27), then was given the privilege of blessing the infant Jesus (Lk 2:28-32). Aged Anna, who served God continually in the Temple was the one chosen to announce the birth to those in Jerusalem who were waiting for redemption (Lk 2:36-38).

This is a Divine manner – **the use of godly people to carry out His purpose**. This began with Noah who *“walked with God”* (Gen 6:9), then Abraham. Isaac, and Jacob. There was Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, and the Prophets, who are referred to as *“holy prophets”* (Lk 1:70; Acts 3:21; 1 Pet 3:2). Then the twelve apostles, Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles, and others like Luke, Barnabas, Silas, James, Jude, Timothy. Titus, and others. This provides an enlarged perspective of why we read admonitions like, *“But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation”* (1 Pet 1:15), *“Be ye separate”* (2 Cor 6:17), and . *“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof”* (Rom 6:12). **This makes us available for Divine use** – and salvation is never depicted as a state in which the individual is not used by God. God does work in His people *“both to do and to will of His good pleasure”* (Phil 2:13); but this will not be done in an unholy people. Rewards are given for doing, or *“labor”* (1 Cor 3:8). Those who *“learn to be idle”* will not receive a blessed reward for being idle.

#### **THE PRIESTS AND LEVITES ASKED JOHN, “WHO ART THOU?”**

*“ John 1:22 **Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?**”*

**THEY SAID UNTO HIM.** Other versions read, *“finally they said,”* <sup>NIV</sup> *““They said therefore unto him,”* <sup>ASV</sup> and *“So they pressed the question.”* <sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> John had identified who

he was not: "I am not the Christ" (1:20). Then, he had answered two of their questions, affirming he was not Elijah (1:21), nor was he *"that prophet,"* which was foretold by Moses (1:21). This, however, did not satisfy them. Therefore, they pressed the issue. They already knew he certainly did not represent any group with which they were familiar. They knew he was not a scribe, or a Pharisee, a priest, or a Sadducee. He surely was not a member of the Sanhedrin. Who, then, could he be? John did not fit into any theological or religious mold that they knew about. They could not say he was "like" this person or that person. He seemed to stand apart from anyone they knew.

**THAT WE MAY GIVEN AN ANSWER TO THEM THAT SENT US.** Here was the reason for their insistence. They were not driven by a personal interest in John and his ministry. They had been commissioned by a body of people they did respect, and felt obligated to obtain a satisfactory explanation who John was. Even then, this was only an novel inquiry, and did not represent an area of legitimate interest.

There are still this kind of people – people who make inquiry into Scriptural and religious matters concerning which they have no pressing interest. Sometimes their questions are traps, designed to make the answerer fumble for an answer, or betray their ignorance on that particular subject. This is the kind of thing the Sadducees did when they asked Jesus concerning a wife who had been married one by one to seven brothers, as each of them died. They asked the Lord, *"And last of all the woman died also. Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her"* (Mat 22:24-28). The whole event is preceded by the explanation, *"The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection, and asked Him"* (Matt 22:23). It was a trick question, and the Lord tied them in knots with His answer. When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had put to silence the Sadducees, they decided to tempt Him with another question, in which they had no real interest: *"Master, which is the great commandment in the Law?"* (Matt 22:36). They knew that under the Law, no command was particularly designated as the greatest one. They knew that Deuteronomy 6:5 was such a commandment, and that Deuteronomy 10:12 declared this stipulation. But no such commandment was in the Ten Commandments. It was actually a summation of the first commandments. However, if any among them knew the answer, they could not imagine that this man, still in His early 30's would be able to draw such a conclusion. Jesus stymied them with His answer, and after he had asked them a question concerning whose Son *"the Christ"* was, they answered wrongly, and were quickly corrected by Him. It is then written, *"And no man was able to answer Him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask Him any more questions"* (Matt 22:46).

My point is that we should not be naive when we are asked questions by people who have not established godly integrity and an unwavering interest in the truth of God. Rather, we need to *"know how we ought to answer every man"* (Col 4:6).

**WHAT SAYEST THOU OF THYSELF?** John did not fit into the religious mold of the day – not even the form of religious that had resulted from the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. A culture had been developed into which a person sent from God could not fit. The same was true of the Lord Jesus. Really, the questioners had no other recourse. They had to ask John who he was, because they simply could not think of any other questions to ask.

**THE WORLD DOES NOT KNOW US.** *"Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not"* (1 John 3:1). The world does not know the people of God

either. They might ask some of the contemporary questions? "Are you a Baptist?" "Do you believe in the baptism of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in tongues?" "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" Or, "What do you think about this of that?" All such questions are an attempt to conveniently classify the person being questioned so they will know whether or not they can befriend them. Jesus said the world would hate His disciples – and it does (John 15:18). He said to them, *"I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you"* (John 15:19). In His explanation of persecution Jesus said, *"And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor Me"* (John 16:3). Jesus affirmed this again in His Gethsemane prayer: *"O righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee"* (John 17:25).

That is the ultimate reason why those questioning John did not know who he was. It is why the ones who sent them wanted to know who he was. Those who do not know God are not able to know those whom He sends – and that includes Jesus Himself, and all who are in Him. In view of this, no professing believer should try and court the world, or seek its favor. We are never to compromise in order to make the world feel better, or be more comfortable with our presence. This is to be known.

### **I AM NOT THE CHRIST**

*"<sup>23</sup> He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias."*

John makes no attempt of self-diagnosis. He rather correctly sees himself as one who has been commissioned by the God of heaven. Further, he goes to the Scriptures to identify who he is. This is not an exercise of human wisdom, but of spiritual insight provoked by the Holy Spirit of God. John will make no effort appear favorably before mere men.

**I AM THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS.** Other versions read, *"calling in the desert,"* <sup>NIV</sup> *"crying in the waste land,"* <sup>BBE</sup> *"crying out in the desert,"* <sup>CJB</sup> *"shouting in the wilderness,"* <sup>NLT</sup> *"a voice from the barren wilderness,"* <sup>LIVING</sup> and *"shouting in the desert."* <sup>WILLIAMS</sup>

This is a direct quotation of the prophet Isaiah: *"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness"* (Isa 40:3) – a word prophesied over seven hundred years before John's ministry. That marvelous prophecy was preceded by these words: *"Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins"* (Isa 40:2). John was preparing the people for a cessation of their fight against God, a time of pardon, and the conclusion of her chastening. It was all to be realized in a coming Savior – one that was promised (Gen 3:15; 12:3; Isa 53), who would resolve the sin problem, and *"bring in everlasting righteousness"* (Dan 9:24).

John the Baptist did not cry out in Jerusalem, or some other metropolis. Rather, he was found shouting out in a desert, a wilderness, or a wasteland. **The reason** – Israel had become a spiritual desert, a wilderness, and a waste land. She was a vineyard that lay idle because she had yielded a harvest of *"wild grapes"* to her Maker (Isa 5:2,4). She was spiritually desolate, and was not ready for a Savior. John was sent by God to get her ready, to summon her out of the desert-state in which she was found.

John was like Ezekiel, prophesying to a valley of dry bones (Ezek 37). The nation of Israel were dry bones, bleached out by the desert sun, baked dry by unacknowledged tribulation and chastening, oppressed by a heathen nation, and yet dominated by religious pride. They maintained religious form in a spiritual graveyard, and carried out various forms of pretentious worship with spiritual corpses. If such people were to hear John the Baptist, they had to go out into a physical environment that matched their spiritual condition. Convenience and ease would not be found

there.

**MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD.** Other versions read, *"Prepare a way for the Lord. Make his paths straight!"* <sup>NJB</sup> *"Clear the way for the LORD's coming!"* <sup>NLT</sup> *"Get ready for the coming of the Lord!"* <sup>LIVING</sup> *"Prepare the Lord's road,"* <sup>IE</sup> *"Straighten the way of the Lord,"* <sup>ABP</sup> *"Get the road ready for the Lord!"* <sup>CEV</sup> and *"Prepare the way of the Lord [level, straighten out, the path of the Lord]."* <sup>AMPLIFIED</sup>

Like Israel of old, the condition of the Israel of John's day was *"a perverse and crooked generation"* (Deut 32:5). The Psalmist spoke of those who *"turn aside unto their crooked ways"* (Psa 125:5). Solomon described the *"evil man"* as one *"whose ways are crooked"* (Prov 2:15). Isaiah said of wayward Israel, *"they have made them crooked paths"* (Isa 59:8).

Making a *"straight"* way is getting rid of the *"crooked ways."* When the Savior began His ministry, the people had to be ready. He would not come to minister to those who were in the process of living ungodly, swallowed up by sin, and enveloped with sinful ways. Straight paths – paths of repentance – must precede any benefit realized by Him. That is why John came *"preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"* (Luke 3:3). It is why Jesus came preaching, *"Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matt 4:17). It is why Jesus said *"that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem"* (Luke 24:47). It is why Peter preached, *"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord"* (Acts 3:19). It is why Paul preached to Jews and Gentiles *"that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance"* (Acts 26:20).

**That is how men "make straight the way of the Lord.** They come to Jesus guilty of sin, but they are not to come to him while practicing sin. I know this is too difficult for some to receive. But this is why John was sent, and the requirement for repentance, which is not only a change of heart, but one of life as well must precede any involvement with Jesus. The cessation of sinful expression is not the total answer, to be sure. The heart must be changed. But that will not happen unless repentance takes place, and the way is made straight for the Lord.

**AS SAID THE PROPHET ISAIAH.** Think of what insight was required for John to identify himself as the very one of whom Isaiah prophesied centuries earlier. Mark also identified John in this manner (Mk 1:2-3). This was not made known to Zecharias when Gabriel notified him of the coming birth of John. There is no evidence that anyone else knew this prior to John's ministry. It was doubtless made known to him when *"the word of God"* came to him *"in the wilderness."*

### **WAS THEY WERE SENT BY THE PHARISEES**

**"<sup>24</sup> And they which were sent were of the Pharisees."**

Other versions read, *"from the Pharisees,"* <sup>NKJV</sup> *"some Pharisees who had been sent,"* <sup>NIV</sup> *"came from the Pharisees,"* <sup>BBE</sup> *"were Pharisees,"* <sup>CJB</sup> *"from, among the Pharisees,"* <sup>DARBY</sup> *"They were Pharisees who had been sent,"* <sup>WEYMOUTH</sup> and *"the messengers belonged to the part of the Pharisees."* <sup>WILLIAMS</sup>

These men, therefore, were not merely a group selected by the Pharisees from the general populous, but were themselves Pharisees. It was obviously thought that they would be able to phrase their questions acceptably, and obtain the requested answers.

This occasion is the very first mention of the Pharisees in Scripture. So far as the record is concerned, they surfaced during the ministry of John the Baptist. There are ninety-five references to this body of religious men from Matthew thru Philippians 3:5, where Paul refers to himself as a former Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. They are mentioned seven times in the book of Acts (5:34; 15:5; 23:6,7,8,9; 26:5), the latter being a reference of Paul to his former life. They are mentioned

eighty-seven times in the Gospels – two times some of their number are said to have believed (John 7:48; 12:42). Once there is a reference to a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who had a special time with Jesus (John 3:1-21). He also spoke in defense of Jesus (John 7:50), and joined with Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus (John 19:38-40). The rest of the references record the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus and the apostles.

**This body of people were not a God-originated or sanctioned group.** At the time of Jesus, history informs us there were three sects, or orders, of Judaism: The Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. The Essenes are not mentioned in Scripture. History states they were “A JEWISH SECT OF MYSTICOASCETICS, WHICH COMBINED FOREIGN ELEMENTS, ESPECIALLY ORIENTAL AND GREEK, WITH JEWISH DOCTRINES, AND WITH CERTAIN PECULIAR VIEWS AND PRACTICES OF THEIR OWN. THEY REJECTED MOST OF THE JEWISH SACRIFICES, AND MADE THEIR FELLOWSHIP AN EXCLUSIVE ONE.” McCLINTOK & STRONG'S

**PHARISEES.** The word “*Pharisee*” properly denotes “ONE WHO IS SEPARATED BY SPECIAL PRACTICES.” Jewish writings, and the Talmud as well, say a Pharisee was “ONE WHO SEPARATED HIMSELF FROM LEVITICAL IMPURITY AND LEVITICALLY IMPURE FOOD.” THEY WERE KNOWN AS “INTERPRETERS OF THE BIBLE, IN CONTRADISTINCTION TO THE SADDUCEES, WHO ADHERED TO THE LETTER OF THE SCRIPTURES, AS WELL AS THE MORE GENERALLY RECEIVED NOTION THAT THEY WERE SO CALLED BECAUSE THEY SEPARATED FROM THE REST OF THE PEOPLE, BELIEVING THEMSELVES TO BE MORE HOLY, AND AT VARIANCE WITH THE MOST ANCIENT AND MOST TRUSTWORTHY AUTHORITIES UPON THIS SUBJECT.” McCLINTOK & STRONG'S History first mentions them around 145 B.C. EASTON

Therefore, here was a body of religious men who achieved leadership status among the people of God **without one word of authorization from God.** God appointed Moses as Israel’s first leader (Ex 3:10-22; 6:13), then Joshua to head up the conquering of Canaan (Num 27:18-23; Deut 1:38; 3:28). The Lord appointed high priests (Ex 35:19; Lev 21:10; Heb 7:11), priests (Num 25:13; Heb 7:5), prophets (Jer 7:25), and kings (1 Sam 10:24; 1 Chron 28:4).

The office of Pharisee was in place for over one hundred and fifty years at the time of John the Baptist. They did not exist prior to the Law, or prior to the Babylonian captivity. Yet, purely by human ingenuity, they rose to the place of self-appointed leadership. They saw fit to question John the Baptist, and even to “*come to his baptism.*” However, John saw through them and said to them, “*O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance*” (Matt 3:7-8).

We have a similar thing that has taken place in our day – the creation of certain offices, and the arrogating of authority and influence to them, entirely apart from a word from God. Jesus has given to the church “*apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers*” (Eph 4:8). He has placed in the church “*first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues*” (1 Cor 12:28), and others (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Pet 4:10-11; 1 Cor 12:8-10), etc. I suppose some might sanction this by referring to certain liberties they see in “*governments.*”

These, however, have not been sufficient for some. Now we have assistant pastors, family-life pastors, youth leaders, praise leaders, Bible College and Seminary professors, presidents and vice presidents, counselors, Convention presidents, etc. These have special credentials, and are authorized to direct the people of God, teach them sectarian dogmas, etc. This all fits handily into a sectarian agenda, but has no place in the Kingdom of God. Men cannot invent authoritative positions, like Pharisees, among the people of God, using those offices to direct and shape the lives of the saints of God. I fear that this is a more serious infraction than many are prone to think. There is now leadership within the family of God that has not been appointed by God, and is not sustained by Jesus Christ. He alone is the “*Head of the church,*” and the “*Savior of the body.*”