

INTRODUCTION

We all celebrated the home-going of Billy Graham a few weeks ago. Even though Billy Graham worked with all Christian denominations, he was always a member of a Southern Baptist Church. For over fifty years, he was a member for First Baptist Church, Dallas. When he was ninety, he moved his membership to a church closer to his home, First Baptist Church of Spartanburg, S.C.

When Billy Graham began his crusades in 1948, he dressed funny. He wore pistachio-colored suits and with bright red ties and wore white shoes. There was much about him that created curiosity. During his crusade in Los Angeles, thousands of people flocked to hear him, including some celebrities. The crusade was scheduled for three weeks, but so many people came that they extended it for eight weeks. Media mogul William Randolph Hurst came one night to hear the young evangelist. He was so impressed that the next day he sent a two-word telegram to every one of his newspapers. It said, "Puff Graham." Soon after that Billy the Baptist's picture appeared on newspapers across the nation. And the Holy Spirit used that free publicity from a seemingly godless mogul to launch his ministry. In his autobiography, *Just As I Am*, Billy said that crusade was the watershed God used to open doors around the world.

Two thousand years before Billy the Baptist, there was a curious looking preacher named John the Baptist. His attire was unusual, too. There was much about him that created curiosity as well. He had never cut his hair or beard. He wore a camel hair coat with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. Matthew and Mark tell us that huge crowds flocked out into the desert to hear him.

John 1:19-28 (NIV). "Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'

They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the Prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, 'Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

'I baptize with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing."

Jesus is the great "I am." He claimed the same title as the God who spoke to Moses in the Burning Bush. Here in John's account, we are going to be exposed to seven "I am" claims of

Jesus. He says, "I am the Bread of Life; I am the Light of the World; I am the door; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth and the life." And "I am the true vine."

We are going to be examining all seven of those claims in depth. If Jesus is the great "I AM." John the Baptizer was the great "I am NOT." Let's learn two important life values John demonstrates for us. All of us who love Jesus should imitate John in these two areas.

1. JOHN RESISTED THE SIN OF SELF-PROMOTION (PRIDE).

When they asked him who he was John replied, "I am not the Messiah." John made three self-denials. They asked, "Are you the Messiah?" He said, "I am not." At this time, there was an intense Messianic expectation in Israel. The Jews had been looking for the Messiah for four hundred years. John was a popular preacher with many disciples. It would have been tempting, to say, "Well, just maybe I AM the Messiah." But he emphatically said, "I am not!"

In the movie "Rudy," Rudy Ruettiger is an undersized kid trying to walk on the Notre Dame football team. He is so discouraged he goes to church. While there Father Cavanaugh tells him, "Son, in thirty-five years of religious study, I have come to two hard incontrovertible facts: There is a God and I'm not Him."

Second they asked John, "Are you Elijah?" In the last lines of the Old Testament, God promised He would send Elijah before the day of the Lord arrived. The Jews were expecting Elijah in such a way that they always added an empty seat at the table for Him at their Passover meal—the Jews still do that today. But John said, "I am not Elijah." That's interesting, because according to Jesus, John *did* perform the role of Elijah coming to announce the Messiah. In Matthew 11:14 (NIV) Jesus said, "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come."

This just shows that John was so humble even he didn't realize the full extent of how God was using him as the forerunner of the Messiah.

Third, they asked him, "Are you the Prophet?" In Deuteronomy 18, Moses predicted that a great Prophet would be sent by God and God would put His words in His mouth." Jesus fulfilled that prophecy, so John said, "I am not." He was the great "I am NOT."

If there was anyone who could have bragged about their spirituality, it was John. The Bible says in Luke 1 that John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. That means he is the only person in human history to be filled with the Holy Spirit his entire life. Even when he was a newborn, John was filled with the Holy Spirit. What does that mean? I'm not sure, but I recall one nursery worker saying, "I would have LOVED to have kept John the Baptist in the church nursery." John was a great example to us of true humility. The Bible says, "All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5 CSB) Are you guilty of pride?

Position

Here's a simple acrostic to show you downward steps of pride. First there is a powerful desire for position—and that position is top dog. A favorite adage in the business world is: Unless you're the front dog, the scenery never changes. Numero Uno is the only coveted position in America. You never hear sports fans screaming, "We're number two!"

Rank

The second step in pride is rank. We are all conscious of our rank, and everybody else's rank, and we're trying to pass them. The great conductor, Leonard Bernstein, commenting on different musical instruments, said: "The most difficult instrument to play is second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin with enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that's a problem. And if no one plays second, we have no harmony." John was willing to play second fiddle to Jesus.

"I must be the center."

"I" stands for "I must be the center." Let's do a spelling lesson. How do you spell "sin?" How do you spell "pride?" How do you spell "anxiety?" I is the middle of sin, pride, and anxiety.

Do you know someone who thinks the entire universe revolves about them? A person who always wants "I" to be the center of attention?

Philosophers Aristotle and Ptolemy proposed the earth was the center of the universe and the sun and stars orbited around us. This was the belief for almost 2,000 years and was the official position of the Catholic Church. So, when Nicolai Copernicus—and later Galileo—proposed the sun was the center of our solar system, it was considered blasphemy. Have you made the same discovery, or do you think and act as if you are the center of your own little universe? Do you evaluate everything and everyone else as based upon what "I think," "I feel," or "I want?"

Destruction

The next letter in pride is D for destruction. The Bible says in Proverbs 16:18 (NIV) says: "Pride goes before destruction; and a haughty spirit before a fall." The only place pride doesn't go before destruction is in the dictionary.

The center letter in Lucifer is also "I." That's how Lucifer became Satan. He had an "I" problem. In Isaiah 14 we read where he said to himself, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the god's assembly...I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:13-14 CSB) Lucifer said, "I'm going up, up, up. But God said, "No Lucifer, you're going down, down, down." It was his pride that led to him being kicked out of heaven, and one day he will face total destruction.

Embarrassment

Finally, there is embarrassment. Do you remember the pride of Simon Peter the night before the crucifixion? He was the one who said, "These others may deny you, but I never will!" And before the rooster crowed in the next sunrise, Peter denied Jesus three times! The Bible says after Peter denied Jesus the third time, Peter looked across the courtyard and saw the soldiers taking Jesus away. The Bible says Jesus "fixed his eyes" on Peter and Peter ran out and wept bitterly. That's what pride leads to every time.

Personal application: I will only discover who I AM in Christ when I admit who I am NOT in my self.

Jesus said, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23 CSB)

Humility is not having a poor self-image of thinking you are a worthless wimp. It's having an honest evaluation of who you are, as the Bible describes you. On one hand I am a sinner who deserves death and hell yet I am a child of God. Humility is found in the tension and the balance between those two realities. Paul wrote in Romans 7 about what a wretched creature he is who cannot refrain from sin. He says the good things he wants to do, he doesn't do them. And the bad things that he doesn't want to do, he does them. What a picture of a failure! But in the very next chapter he writes about how we are deeply loved as children of God—heirs of God with Christ. Was he confused? No, he understood the balance. Read it for yourself. He wrote, "I know that nothing good lives in me...those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." (Romans 7:18 CSB; 8:14 NIV) Another way to look at it is to remember Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5 NKJV) That will prevent pride. Yet the Bible says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13 NKJV) That keeps you from being an emotional failure who never attempts anything great for God.

The great Christian writer, A.W. Tozer, wrote about humility: "A humble man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is weak and helpless as God declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time he is in the sight of God of more importance than the angels. In himself, nothing, in God, everything."

Someone once said, "God has wisely designed the human body so that you can neither pat yourself on the back, nor kick yourself in the seat."

2. JOHN CAME TO BUILD A HIGHWAY SO PEOPLE COULD MEET JESUS.

John said, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" John the Baptist knew who he was, and why he existed. He came to point people to Jesus. There was something he said and something he saw.

(1) A voice saying, "Get ready for Jesus!"

John quoted Isaiah 40 where the prophet speaks of how "Every valley shall be filled. Every mountain should be brought low. Every crooked road will be made straight, and every rough way shall be made smooth."

When I first went to be pastor of the church in Gardendale, Alabama in 1984, we lived on the only section of Interstate 65 that wasn't finished. I-65 started at Chicago and went all the way to the Gulf Coast at Mobile. In Gardendale, the interstate suddenly became a four-lane road with traffic lights. I used to tell people I lived at the second traffic light south of Chicago.

One of our deacons worked for the Alabama Highway Department and he was in charge of the construction of the remaining forty miles of Interstate 65. He used to say he used Isaiah 40 to build the interstate. His job was to fill in the valleys, lower the mountains, straighten the crooked ways, and smooth out the rough places. It was a great day when I-65 opened, because anyone could drive all the way north and south without stopping.

That's what John came to do. He built a highway to Jesus. And that's what we should be doing. We should be removing obstacles so we can help people get where they are to meet Jesus.

(2) A vision of the greatness of Jesus.

John the Baptist was a great man according to Jesus. In Luke 7:28 (NIV) Jesus said, "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John." Wow! That's an amazing tribute. Then Jesus said, "but the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he."

John was also great because his was a miracle birth, like that of Isaac. Before Gabriel visited Mary, he visited John's father, Zechariah. The Bible says in Luke 1 that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, was barren, and they were both very old people. But as God performed a miracle in the life of Abraham and Sarah, He performed a miracle in the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and John was born—a miracle baby

So this man, who was the greatest born of woman, and a miracle birth could only talk about the greatness of Jesus. He said, "Someone is coming after me, who is so great, that I'm not even worthy to untie his sandal." Everyone's feet stayed dirty in Israel because of they walked everywhere and there were very few paved surfaces. It was the job of the very lowest slave to untie the sandals of guests and wash their feet. John saw the greatness of Jesus. And in the next message we will see where John points to Jesus and identifies Him as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world.

So here's the personal challenge: Is my life drawing people to Jesus or directing people away from Him? Jesus said, "Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather with me scatters." (Luke 11:23 CSB)

CONCLUSION

John's job was to tell people to get ready because the Messiah was coming soon. Our job is to tell people of this generation to get ready because Jesus the Messiah is coming back.

It was Sunday night, October 30, 1938, the night before Halloween. There were no televisions then, but millions of Americans were listening to CBS radio network. There was a program of soothing orchestra music when suddenly the announcer broke in and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program to bring you a special bulletin from the International Radio News Network."

Over the next hour, a series of hysterical announcers described the horror of an invasion of Martian monsters that had landed in New Jersey and were using heat ray guns to kill Americans. The announcer said space invaders were spreading across America.

The broken voice of an announcer from New York City choking on the poisonous gas of the Martians ended the show. He claimed the Army had been wiped out and then he died on the air.

Of course, now we know this was the original fake news. It was a dramatization of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. And the printed radio guides for the day even announced it would be a radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds*. But the result of the broadcast was mass hysteria and panic.

Although some claim the newspapers' claims of hysteria were overblown, it was estimated that five million people heard the broadcast and that one out of five people suffered severe trauma from thinking it was a real attack. People took to the streets covering their faces with towels because of the poisonous gas. Phone lines shut down from so many people trying to call out. Churches were suddenly packed with people who thought it was the end of the world.

You've probably all heard that story, but there's one story from that night you've probably never heard.

At Campbellsville College, a Baptist College in Campbellsville, Kentucky, there was a student who heard the broadcast and thought it was the end of the world. He ran across campus that night yelling, "The world is ending." He ran to the home of the Chaplain and pounded on his door. When the Chaplain opened the door the boy screamed, "The world is ending tonight, and I'm not ready to die. Tell me how I can get ready to die!" The Chaplain sat him down and talked with him about accepting Christ. The young man gave his life to Christ.

Of course, the next day, everyone knew it was a hoax, and that young man who had run across campus became a laughing stock for the other students. He was so embarrassed he planned to leave the school.

But at the chapel service the next day, the Chaplain had the young man stand up. Everyone snickered as he stood. The chaplain said, "I admire the courage of this young man. He was

honest enough to admit that he wasn't ready to die. Are all of you ready to die? If not, are you willing to admit it like our friend here?" And he left them with those words.

That fearful student ultimately became a missionary and spent his life telling people how to get ready to die.

Are you ready? The Martians haven't landed. But we don't know when Jesus is going to return. Are you ready? Are you ready to die? Are you ready to meet the Lord? Like John, our job is to tell people, "Jesus is coming. Are you ready to meet Him?"

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For the Joy...
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