

JOHN THE BAPTIST

We want to look at John the Baptist as a picture of the link to the coming of the Lord. We read in Malachi the prediction about his preparation and coming. Right at the end of the Old Covenant, this prophet prophesied before a time of silence, a time of discipline, and a time when, even though the Lord was still with His people through four hundred years, there was no kingdom prophecy going forth; rather there was just a kind of existence.

*Malachi 3:1-3—“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.
“But who can endure the day of His coming?
And who can stand when He appears?
For He is like a refiner’s fire
And like a fuller’s soap.
He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver;
He will purify the sons of Levi,
And purge them as gold and silver,
That they may offer to the Lord
An offering in righteousness.*

[Then as the dialogue continues, we come to a section beginning in verse 16, in which we see a corporate gathering of hidden ones in the days of Malachi.]

Malachi 3:16-4:6—Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another,
And the Lord listened and heard;
So a book of remembrance was written before Him
For those who fear the Lord
And who esteem His name.
“They shall be Mine,” says the Lord of hosts,
“On the day that I make them My jewels.
And I will spare them
As a man spares his own son who serves him.”
Then you shall again discern
Between the righteous and the wicked,
Between one who serves God
And one who does not serve Him.
“For behold, the day is coming,
Burning like an oven,

And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble.
And the day which is coming shall burn them up,”
Says the Lord of hosts,
“That will leave them neither root nor branch.
But to you who fear My name
The Sun of Righteousness shall arise
With healing in His wings;
And you shall go out
And grow fat like stall-fed calves.
You shall trample the wicked,
For they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet
On the day that I do this,”
Says the Lord of hosts.
“Remember the Law of Moses, My servant,
Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel,
With the statutes and judgments.
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.”

Luke 3:1-9—Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough ways smooth;
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

v. 15—Now as the people were in expectation ...

Our Father, we have had this theme before us all week long, and we have had the word of the promise of Your soon coming. You have said it in Your Word and we believe it. We ask You to make this Word alive in our hearts as we come to the end of this age. But Lord, we want to know how to live in the end, how to be pleasing unto You as servants of Yours. We thank You for the messengers who have come this week, for the children who have sung, for those who have taken part in burden and prayer for this whole time. Indeed Lord, we do pray about that link. We do not know from what generation the link will be found, how many, how few, who they are. But we do believe that there will be those who will be so attractive to the Bridegroom that He can wait no longer and the heavens will open, and He will return. In any case as we have been together in these days, we do ask You one more time for a refreshing, a rekindling of the Holy Spirit within us, a new strength, a new awareness, a deeper insight into Your precious Word. Thank You, Lord, for this time together as we commit it into Your hands. In Jesus' precious name. Amen.

THE LINK BETWEEN THE AGE OF LAW AND THE AGE OF GRACE

The King is coming soon for His kingdom. The gospel is being broadcast all over the earth, and there are signs that we can see all around us. Even in Israel the fig tree is getting ripe. Things are winding down, but there is that final moment when there is a link—not an event, but a people prepared and ready for the Lord's coming, and at that moment we will see the age of grace turn into the kingdom age. We have as an illustration John the Baptist who was a link between the age of law and the age of grace. He actually bridges, as it were, the last word spoken in the Old Covenant of his coming, and the New Covenant, especially in the Gospel of Mark, where we see John again at the beginning of a new transition, a new age. So John is indeed a link.

JOHN GREW STRONG IN SPIRIT

In Luke we read these words: "So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel" (1:80).

There came a day in John's life after thirty years as a hidden one that he came out and spoke up. He shattered the silence with the Word of God, and the ground began to shake, as it were, as he began to manifest himself. As it says in verse 80, the child had grown strong in spirit. And then in 1:17 we hear the angel speaking: "John 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 CAME OUT OF THE WILDERNESS LOOKING AS FIERCE AS ELIJAH

John is likened to Elijah. You remember that Elijah was a kind of stern character; he stood up to Ahab. He could not quite stand up to Jezebel but he stood up to Ahab and to the people of God and said, "Choose today whom you will serve." He showed by a great sign that Jehovah is a living God, and people bowed down. Elijah looked fierce, and not only that, he was wearing fierce clothes.

John the Baptist came out of the wilderness wearing fierce clothes. They were both fearsome. They had eyes, I am sure, that penetrated into the soul of those they looked at. If one just looked into John's eyes he was ready to repent because John could see down into the soul. When somebody came down to the water and tried to snooker his way in, John said, "Hey, you viper, you are not ready for this. When you produce fruits and show that you are serious then I will think about it." There was no getting pass that sternness of character. He thundered. He was indeed in the spirit and power of Elijah.

JESUS SPEAKS ON JOHN'S BEHALF

Later on, we find Jesus talking about John who is now in prison. Some messengers came from John to talk to Jesus on John's behalf about being in prison. After the messengers leave, the Lord Jesus talks about John in Matthew 11: "As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You'" (vv. 7-10).

Jesus describes this man. Now again we have to understand the context here. People came out from Jerusalem to go to where John was. This was the religious capital of the Jews. For these people to travel down into the wilderness where John was baptizing was quite a journey; it was no picnic. You did not take your car and go for the afternoon. What did you go down to see? A reed blowing in the wind? A man dressed in soft clothing, who could take either side of an argument or change from one day to the next. No. You went down to see someone straight as an arrow. Did you go and see one of those royal shows with the changing of the guards? Is that why you went down and spent two days in the rough wilderness to see this guy? No. You went down there because when you met John, you met God. It was a tremendous ministry he had.

JOHN'S HIDDEN LIFE

We know that John had a hidden life. For thirty years only a few people knew about his existence. We want to just mention some of the people in John's life that he grew up with, ones that we have already mentioned—Zacharias, Elizabeth, Anna, Simeon, Mary. These were the hidden people in the Judean hills who were awaiting the consolation of Israel, who were righteous and pious, and especially simple people. God visited these people in a wonderful way and prepared their hearts. This was, as it were, the womb in which John was raised up.

We need to learn the lesson that even today, although there are big cities like New York, the Lord's eyes run to and fro across the earth looking to show Himself strong to those who have a devoted heart, who are pure and loyal to the Lord. The Lord is aware of these hidden ones who are all over this world. We do not know most of them, but they are faithful, pious, simple, and righteous. They are waiting for the coming of the Lord. One day these hidden ones, who fear the Lord and speak with one another, whose names are written in that book of remembrance, will shine and the Son of Righteousness will bring healing and exalt them. The vessel that the Lord is looking for when He comes back is a bride who is prepared and her

heart is full of devotion and love. These are not necessarily big shots, but are simply devoted to Jesus.

AN EXHORTATION TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE

The Church Is a Family

Before we leave the subject and talk about John himself who seems to be the public side of the servant whom the Lord is looking for among these hidden ones, I want to share for a moment to the young people. I want to give you a little exhortation, especially those of you who may fellowship in one of the assemblies of the hidden ones.

In the Christian events that are going on today there is a whole new phenomena. There are Christian mega theme parks that are especially tailored for young people. By that, I mean these kinds of works, churches, or large groups that have fancy cool names, cool bands, and cool lighting. They even have football stars, celebrities who speak, intellectuals, profound thinkers, exciting times, multimedia flashing in the background. It is very enticing to young people.

I was recently in San Diego, and my wife and I were staying right near this place that is actually like Coney Island with a Ferris wheel, rides, and so forth. I met some of the saints and talked to them, especially about the young people. If you do not know, San Diego is a place to go if you are a Christian young person and you want to be a cool Christian young person. It is happening. When you go there you have your choice of many different flavors of groups—whatever you want. Do you want the Source or the Rock or the Meaning or the Hill or the Reality? They all have cool names. You have your own choice, your own particular bent. You can go to large groups or small groups and you can find something going on every night. It is like free rides and different experiences all the time. I know this is very tempting for young people to go to. They see all of these things going on, then they see their little hidden assembly and they begin to despise the day of small things. I am not against young people going for a nice blowout of worship and getting together with other young people and throwing their arms up in the air for a few hours and saying how much they love Jesus. But you can be involved in something like that for five years and never touch the cross in your life, and never learn the lesson of loving older people or younger people. The church is not age specific; it is a family. And how we ought to learn the lesson of loving the family!

Tabitha

Do you know who Tabitha is? Tabitha was a little sister in Joppa. Joppa was on the coast of Israel and there was a little fellowship in which Tabitha gathered. It may have been in Simon the tanner's house, but if it was it was a pretty stinky fellowship. It was probably a small group that met in Joppa, and I am sure Tabitha was tempted just like all young people to take the bus up to Jerusalem where Peter, James, John and the whole assembly met on Solomon's porch, and thousands of people meeting house to house. Things were happening. What was happening in Joppa? There were no billboards up. There was no rock band in Joppa. But Tabitha made shawls for the old ladies and did various good works among her little family. I tell you they missed her when she suddenly died; but she experienced resurrection life. The Lord used Peter in bringing her back to life. She also got to meet Peter firsthand when he lifted her up.

She also happened to be the connection that led Peter to be involved with Cornelius and opened the door to the Gentiles to hear the gospel. This is Tabitha—she minded her own business in Joppa and God blessed her.

Don't Despise the Day of Small Things

If your young people's group is you—you are it—the young peep and there is not even a *ple*, if that is where the Lord has you, He will show you great and glorious things if you will be faithful to Him. I believe if there is a John the Baptist being raised up in this last day who will be able to stand up and be counted that he may just come from some hidden assembly.

You young ones, don't give up on the saints, those older ones around you. Do not get prejudiced about worship, thinking that it has to be with a guitar and a beat and something flashy. The good hymn songs should be a part of your repertoire as well. Do not be impatient when that brother gives you daily manna on Sunday. He may have worked fifty hours during the week, and instead of watching television and drinking a beer, he studied the Word, prepared a message, and shared it. It is bread and butter; it is your manna. Do not despise that because somebody has a flashy message somewhere else. You need daily manna. Here is a word to you dear ones who live among the hidden ones: God knows your name, and He has you written down in the book of remembrance if you are being faithful.

JOHN IS A NAZARITE

With that in mind, let's look at John. John was raised up for public testimony, and what a tremendous testimony he had! However, he was raised up in the secret place. And as we look at the picture of a vessel that the Lord would be pleased to come and receive to Himself, we see in John's background in Luke 1:15 that he was a Nazarite; he was set apart as a vow. His parents kept him from wine and the razor, kept him separate and holy. That is part of the training of a vessel, a Nazarite separated unto God.

We know that John was from a priestly family, so his heritage would have been that of a priest. He could have gone into the priesthood if he had done the apprenticing and all that was involved. We can only imagine that after John was born, his father, who was quite old, probably took him up to Jerusalem for all the feasts. Little John had a special place over in the corner when his dad was doing various service, taking different bowls and things around, whatever his particular service at that time would be. John got to see the beauty of the temple, he heard the beauty of the worship, and saw the wonder of the feast. It must have been wonderful. But I think what stayed in John's young mind the most as he followed his priestly father around was the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. Something struck John in an unusual way. According to Josephus, at the time of Jesus, during the Passover Feast, Josephus counted 256,500 lambs that were slaughtered in Jerusalem. When it came time to sacrifice those lambs for the Passover Feast of more than two million who would flood Jerusalem for that season, all the priests were called on duty. There was none on vacation during that time. All the priests were there with their smocks on and were involved in this tremendous offering. If you were a little child, that had to have been a pretty impressive thing. It is no wonder John saw the Lamb of God in Jesus. It was his focal point later on.

JOHN GOES TO THE WILDERNESS

Elizabeth must have told John when he was a young man about the prophecies involved—the miracle of his birth, his destiny, the forerunner, this voice in the wilderness. They must have told him when he was a kid about “a voice of one crying in the wilderness”—“is that you, John? So stop crying and eat your food.” I am sure he heard the stories.

When John’s parents died—and we do not know when that happened or how old John was, probably a young teenager—he decided to go into the wilderness. He stayed there until he was thirty years old (Luke 1:80). He tried to find a home in the wilderness, and perhaps it was part of that destiny—“a voice of one crying in the wilderness.” He went to the wilderness to find out what was going on there.

SERVANTS ARE PREPARED IN THE WILDERNESS

This is a good lesson for us to learn and a good point for those who would be servants of the kingdom. Servants of the kingdom are prepared in the wilderness. A servant of God who will speak God’s message has got to have their spiritual gymnasium, a time where God can deal with them. From John’s birth he was filled with the Spirit. Now that is a tremendous advantage. Being filled with the Spirit is wonderful, but he had to be strengthened in his spirit in order to go through those days in the wilderness.

After the Holy Spirit came upon the Lord Jesus, he went into the wilderness and when He came back out, it was in the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a spiritual transaction that is necessary, which perhaps is represented by looking at this matter of going into the wilderness.

It was predicted of him in Luke 1:17 that he would go in the spirit and power of Elijah. How do you become strong in spirit? I cannot imagine that John was anything other than a strong-souled person when he went into the wilderness. First of all, if you are a kid, maybe 15, how many will say, “I am going to go to the wilderness and live on my own”? He was a strong young man, but a strong soul does no good if he is going to speak and be God’s voice. Something has to happen in your life. Otherwise, you are no good as a messenger to the Lord if it is just the reactions out of your soul. John had to learn how to be moved by the leading of the Spirit and not just by the response of his soul. The brothers who share the Word of God find that they come to this place where they realize the Lord is saying: “Don’t just preach on Sunday based on something you saw Thursday from which you had a reaction.” Maybe you saw folks bickering so you are going to share on “speak no evil one to another.” What does the Lord want you to say? We know what our soul wants to say, but what does the Lord want us to say? Learning to hear the Lord and learning to live in response to our spirit rather than a reaction of our soul is going to be vital if we are going to be a voice for the Lord. These things must be learned in the wilderness. We can just imagine that John was already learning this lesson in the wilderness—“I must decrease.”

WHAT IS THE WILDERNESS FOR US?

Where is our wilderness? Does the Lord send you out into some kind of a patch? Now some people are pretty strong. Lance tells us the story of how the Lord had to send him out to

Egypt. He went out into the wilderness so the Lord could teach him lessons. How about your wilderness? Did you go out and live in Egypt? No, a lot of time the wilderness is the church—an inhospitable place, full of danger, and wild animals. But more specifically, the wilderness defines anything that your soul does not like—need, loneliness, fears—all of those kind of things we spend a lot of time trying to avoid. It is almost a fact of life that young people cannot stand silence. They will go to bed with their iPod and even turn their computer on before they go to the bathroom in the morning. God forbid there be silence. It is unheard of to have no television on in the living room.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WILDERNESS?

What happens in the wilderness? We have to imagine what happened to John in those years he was there—about fifteen years. First of all, he was waiting, a lot of waiting, waiting for the Lord, and praying. Hopefully he had some scrolls with him; perhaps from his father he had the Torah, maybe Isaiah. So he read, prayed, and waited—silence. Only by being yoked with the Lord in a time like that do we find rest for our souls. The Lord can speak to us if we ever rest. If we are agitated, it is hard sometimes for the Lord to get through and share with us what He wants. He waited and waited. I do not know if this is any indication, but we have from the stories in Samuel's life that he was about as stubborn as John the Baptist. Samuel argued with God. “No, no, that is not the right one; it is this guy over here.” The Lord told him to do things that he actually disagreed with but he did them. Maybe you think you are a very holy person, but if you do not do some wrestling and some arguing with God, if you do not have some issues, I do not think you know what the wilderness is.

Now, of course, you know the speakers who come here to speak at the conference are completely different. We live in an ideal world, in a bliss of silence with no problems around, and the Lord sends angels down and just speaks to us. Well, you know better than that. If you want to be a servant of God, you have a good wrestling match on your hands. God deals with you in your soul. He wrestles with you, He talks to you, you disagree with Him, and you get upset about it. Then you have to go back and rethink it and then do it in the wilderness. You know what the wilderness is? Maybe it is that small little church or fellowship you are in. It is where you get dealt with; it is the cross in your life. It is those things that touch your flesh wherever it hits.

We do not know where John's weakness was. It could have been loneliness which was a big issue that had to be faced and conquered. It could have been fear or insecurity. Everybody does not believe in Jehovah Jireh. Sometimes you have to go through some hunger and thirst before you discover the Lord as Jehovah Jireh. For some people, it is awfully hard to be content. But somewhere John had learned how to be content with camel's hair, a simple diet, and a stone for a pillow. God's servants sometimes get put in strange places. If your idea of serving God is travelling around in the midst of Marriot marquis, you might find the Lord saying, “I do not think you need all of that.” How can we serve the Lord if we are laden down with all of these soulish issues? So many of God's servants have so many issues that the Lord just cannot say, “Go.” And you say, “Well, I cannot go. What if I break out in warts? What will happen?” Sometimes you have to go and it is scary business.

A VISIT TO KOREA

I went to Korea one time, and I met up with this little Korean pastor who was full of faith. We were travelling around and preaching the gospel together. I was preaching he was interpreting, or maybe he was preaching, I could not tell. We got through after one session and then he said, "Let's go to this woman's house. I just got a note that she has typhoid fever. She has been quarantined in her house. We want to go and share the gospel with her." I thought to myself: "Oh boy, do I have typhoid fever shots?" Of course I didn't. "Well," I said, "are you sure we should go?" He said, "Listen, when we go with the gospel you do not have to worry about the devil making you sick; he needs to worry about us and what we are going to do when we get in there." I said, "Okay; you first." I was willing to go with this guy; he was so brave for such a short guy. We went into this house and it was so dark and had such a terrible odor. We said, "In Jesus' name, we lift this thing off this place." And the place lit up. We preached the gospel to this lady, and the guy prayed with her and she got saved. Then we left the house. I saw the pastor three days later and I had to ask him: "What is the story?" He said, "Oh, she is healed; she came down to the church and wants to be baptized."

You have to learn that lesson by experience. If you are afraid of every possible disease and anything that may befall you, then there are a lot of issues there that need to be dealt with. Can the Lord tell you, "go"? There is a wilderness, isn't there? If you want to be a servant of God, welcome to the wilderness. We learn that it is not our way; it is the Lord's way. That is why we spend a lot of time waiting, but that is not the main reason.

WE HAVE TO FIND OUR VOICE

The main reason is we have to find our voice. He was a voice in the wilderness. Now he was in the wilderness but where is the voice? He needed to learn to hear the Lord. This is something that takes a while. We hear wrong sometimes. We have our impression of things, and sometimes it is right. However, we have to wait for that voice. This is a principle. When the Lord deals with your soul, your flesh, then you are able to see into the souls of other people. We can see from John's ministry that he could look right into a person's soul. He could see a sinner coming, he could see a brood of vipers, and he could see Jesus just by looking into that soul. Have you been dealt with in such a way that you can look and see what is in that person's life? But once you see, what do you do? John had to wait. What do you do? What do you say? How do you bring a person to repentance? Do you offend them? Do you speak up? What is the voice? How do you do that? John had to learn that voice. He respected his dad and the priesthood, but it turned out that the priestly voice was not his voice. He never went in and took the apprenticeship towards being a priest.

When it speaks of John going into the wilderness, some people think what it really means is that he went to the Essenes community (that community of people who separated themselves and lived by the Dead Sea, who found the scrolls, baptized themselves almost daily and spoke about holiness and a whole lot of things) when he was growing up and spent some time in the wilderness with them. Whether he did or not, there is no evidence. But I do know one thing; he discovered that was not his voice. His life was not to be isolated from people. He was to be a

voice to speak to people. He knew isolation was not for him and neither was being an Essene his voice.

JOHN COMES ON THE SCENE

In John's gospel he gives an eyewitness view of things because he was a disciple of John the Baptist. In chapter 1 we see John the Baptist come on the scene: "Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" [Maybe some of those priests knew him from his childhood days.]

He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

And he answered, "No" (vv. 19-21).

Then he goes on to say that he was the voice crying in the wilderness. Even by the time of Jesus, there were many false Christs around. There were many so-called Elijahs. A guy comes into town, opens a little store where you can buy a camel-haired suit and claims to be Elijah. There were many false prophets all over the place claiming to be *the* prophet, the one Moses predicted that would come after him. Some would be a Jeremiah. Lance knows they are still in the city of Jerusalem. There are those who claimed to be Elijah, some who claimed to be the two witnesses. It was a city full of pretenders. Was John going to be a pretender? Are you Elijah? "Yeah, that's me." No, he was not interested in position. Oh what a temptation! What are you, an apostle? "Yeah, that is me." No, no, I am not Elijah. I am not the Messiah. I am not the prophet. I have come with a burden; I am a voice crying in the wilderness. John was learning who he was.

JOHN FINDS HIS VOICE

When we turn to Luke 3, we see something really wonderful. He found his voice. It is so important that it is actually marked and dated by Luke redundantly in verse 3:1. "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate Herod, Philip, Trachonitis, Lysanias, Annas Caiaphas," and then you get to verse 2: "The word of God came to John in the wilderness." Now I know; I know; I got the word; I got the burden; I got the promise. And from that time on, he became the voice. He spoke.

HEAVEN RATIFIES JOHN'S WORD

Everyone who is a servant of the Lord finds a unique voice. Down through the centuries, when you look at church history at the men who were epoch-changing links to recovery and awakening, they were quite unique individuals and very human. The gospel writers make sure we understand that John the Baptist was a very human guy, but he was a very human man under a very divine burden. When he spoke with his human voice, the throne in heaven ratified everything he said. He spoke, God confirmed. He said repent, and God brought conviction into people's lives. That is anointing. He spoke and God ratified.

There is a wonderful verse in the story of Samuel in chapter 3 where Samuel began to see God and he starts to speak and prophesy. It says, "God let none of his word fall to the ground." Samuel spoke and God stood with him. What he said God ratified.

JOHN'S MESSAGE—THE KINGDOM

John came out of the wilderness with a voice and God stood with him. When John spoke, it shook the silence of Israel. It shook people awake. Suddenly they were hearing nothing other than God Himself. When he said "repent," they repented. Multitudes came out. What was it really? What is the essence of John's message? Maybe you say it is baptism or repentance. True. It spoke of One who was to come. True. But what was it that made him the voice in the wilderness saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord"? When John the Baptist brought his message, he cleared off all of the clutter that had accumulated about what it means to be the kingdom of God.

John was in the kingdom of Israel, but was it really a kingdom of Israel? It was actually a province of Rome. Who was the king on the throne but a pretender and corrupt? He was not an anointed king. This was not even a kingdom, because all of the rituals, teachings, and traditions obscured the basic foundational reality. When John came and spoke, he said, "God is your King and you are not ready. He is sending His Messiah and you need to repent." People were shocked out of sleep. They awoke, jumped into that water, and waited for a real kingdom. What a tremendous impact this man had in the approximately one year of his ministry before he was killed. He burned like a bright light. Jesus said he was a burning lamp, speaking the truth, bringing the kingdom tangibly before them (see Luke 3:15). When he spoke there was an expectation of the kingdom, and suddenly it all cleared out.

JOHN WAS THE PREPARER OF THE WAY

What was his ministry after all? It was a preparer of the way; he brushed off the doorway. As it says in Malachi, "And he will come to prepare the way and then the Lord will come into His temple and purify the sons of Levi." But somebody had to open the door and brush off the foundation, and then we see it fulfilled in Jesus' ministry. After John brought this message of His coming, then Jesus came and went into the temple and cleansed it. This ministry of Elijah and John the Baptist, I think in the end has something to do with Israel. But we use this as an illustration of one who was cleaning off and fixing things up.

Later on when Jesus came into Jerusalem the week that He was to go to the cross, at one point, the chief priests and elders came to Him and said: "Jesus, by what authority are You doing these things? Who gave You this authority?" Jesus said, "Let me ask you a question. If you answer my question, I will answer yours. Was John's baptism from heaven or man?" His arguers were silenced. Everybody knew that John's voice, his baptism, and his ministry were from heaven.

Jesus went on to say, "What did you come out to hear? Just a speaker, a novelty, a kind of show? Did you come out to the wilderness to see a parade?" "No, you came out because you heard something. What did you hear? 'Repent.'" And Jesus came in as the King.

MINISTRY OF SERVANTS TODAY

I want to make an application of this. I believe servants of God have a ministry today even in these last days. Just as John spoke to Israel, part of our ministry is speaking to the church, awakening the church. How? The church has gotten so encrusted with so much stuff that we do not know how to define what the church is anymore. We do not know what the church is. People do not know what membership means. People have an idea of ministry that is not at all as it is described in the New Testament. There are layers and layers of human traditions and interpretation and ways that have been thrown on top of the church. As a servant of the Lord in the last day, I believe the main burden he needs to do is to clear the foundation so people can see Jesus in the church. We can call Him Head. Everybody calls Him Head of His church and the foundation of the church. But so much other stuff has been added to it, sometimes you cannot tell with the wings and additions that have been made what the church really is—that it is people. We need to be able to see and clarify this foundation that has gotten so covered up. The church is Jesus Christ.

PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Most of you know I was a pastor at a church many years ago. I went to a good Baptist college and studied religion; then I went to seminary four years and got a degree. They screwed a halo on my head, and I served as a pastor. When I came to my first conference, I heard for the first time Lance say “the church is Christ.” I see all of you know what that means, but I do not know how many people outside of this auditorium know what that means. How cluttered things have gotten! Our testimony needs to be on the clear foundation of Jesus Christ, center and circumference. That is the church. This is an organic body we have been baptized into. The whole way the body works is so different from the way the church organization is working. All of that clutter! The Lord is looking for some prepared people who are simple, who are standing in Jesus Christ and Christ is in them. They understand the shared life we have together in Christ, through Christ, with Christ, in the power of Christ.

I remember the second time I went to Russia, and I was teaching in a Bible school. I talked about this Christ in you, and I shared some simple things. Afterward a number of young people at the back of this classroom were crying because they were going out to serve God and preach the gospel, but they had never heard that Christ is their life. They were just weeping for joy.

I do not think in this last day what we need are apostles, prophets, or anything like that so-called that are just positions. We need the functions, but we need a voice that cries out in the wilderness of the church and says, “Here is the Lord; this is the church; this is the kingdom.”

SHARING THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

There are so many Christians who have no idea what we are talking about when we say we are in the church and we are in the kingdom, but there is a difference. We need to share these things. The gospel of the kingdom of God needs to be preached in all the world as a testimony to the nations, and then the end will come. Oh, to know the kingdom, to be servants of the kingdom, to have all of this clutter clarified so people can see!

So this is our problem. If we go and share this truth that the church is Christ, but we are not living it, where is the testimony in it? We are just getting together with a couple of Christians for an hour or two each week, but there is no body life or sharing of Christ together. If we have no testimony and we share this word, the voice has no ratification. That is what you and I are up against unless we are willing to go through our wilderness and learn the lessons of body life and the reality of the church. If somebody says, "What are you talking about?" We can actually say, "Come and see," rather than "Don't come to our place." Are we working it out where we live? Are we a reality where we live? Is there spiritual reality there? That is what the wilderness does. It brings us out of a lot of soulish baggage into a spiritual reality which is so simple. That is why John's gospel is so precious for the church. It is all about spiritual reality. If He isn't our bread, our light, our resurrection, then whatever we are calling ourselves is not the reality that is necessary for the church to be perfected.

THE LINK WAS MADE WHEN JOHN SPOKE: "BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD"

There is one other thing I would like to say. Not only did John speak as a voice and say this is the kingdom of God and suddenly the kingdom was alive to them, actually the transition moment, the moment of actual linkage was when he said, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." The day before he had baptized Jesus, not knowing exactly who He was, but when the Spirit came down and rested upon Him, then he knew. The next day when He came by, John said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Suddenly the Lord of heaven was linked to us. Now it is more than just Israel, isn't it? The Lamb of God died on the behalf of all of us. That was John's voice speaking out his highest message. The link was made, and we can know what it means to be saved because of the Lamb of God.

This is the gospel right here. I believe this was John's highest point of ministry when he made that statement, "Behold the Lamb of God." After that, probably his best disciples left him, including John the apostle, and some others, and John's ministry went down and Jesus' ministry went up. Jesus and his followers were baptizing more people than John, and John's disciples were a little jealous. John was not jealous. He said, "It is my time to decrease." But the one who said, 'I am not worthy to untie His sandals has shown up. I am His friend. I am a friend of the Bridegroom.' Within a year, he was beheaded and died—a friend of the Bridegroom. John's voice was both to the kingdom of God and to Israel as he woke them up to the reality of the kingdom and the soon coming Messiah. He also spoke this revelation to the world that Jesus is the Lamb of God.

THE CHURCH NEEDS TO PREACH THE GOSPEL

The church in the last days needs to preach the gospel. Even the hidden ones, even a small assembly needs to be willing to go out and preach the gospel. There are still some people who are hungry and in darkness. There are still some people who are looking for a Savior. Until the day that Jesus comes back, should we have stopped this whole business? Part of the problem with the reality in our fellowship life is because we are not witnessing; we are not moving out beyond ourselves. We can gather together and have a great rah rah session but not prove what faith we really have. But if we go outside the walls and start speaking of Jesus in hostile

territory, we find out the reality of the Lord's ratification. The Lord still wants to bring people to Himself. That gospel of the kingdom includes the gospel of salvation. I do not think we should just leave it to big gospel organizations. Now the Lord is doing a wonderful work in gathering people in. During the time we have been speaking here, some six thousand people have gotten saved according to some recent figures as to how many people are getting saved around the world. It is a tremendous thing. It is wonderful to hear news of how the Lord is breaking out in initiatives.

Recently, some Romanians stopped by when they came through New York. They told us this wonderful story of the Romanians meeting in groups. Well, God has decided in Romania to save Gypsies. It is a new open door, and the young people have been going down to the Gypsy villages, and the parents are saying, "No, no, don't go down there." But the young people are going down to these Gypsy villages and the Gypsies are getting saved as fast as they can preach. Isn't that wonderful?

Last year I went back to Russia. The door is slowly closing in Russia, at least that huge ingathering that we saw. The season is sort of winding down. But it is interesting that southern Russia is opening up with the gospel to the Muslims. The whole of southern Russia is nominal Muslims who do not know much about anything. The church has gone down there and found a ripe field and people are being saved. I thank God for such people who are willing to go into these territories and preach the gospel. Isn't it amazing that Muslims are being saved? You have heard the stories of dreams, miracles, and all kinds of things happening among them. The leaders of the Muslims are really getting upset; they do not know what to do about it. But the Lord has decided to put His finger right there.

GOD IS LOOKING FOR FAITHFUL VESSELS

Maybe where you live is tougher than New York, but it is not easy to go out and preach the gospel in New York. We go out with a little band, hand out tracts, try to talk and preach and sing. We believe it is important for our own sakes to be willing to lay down our fears and trust the Lord and go out. I think that is part of our testimony. Even as John spoke of the Lamb of God, so we should speak of the Lamb of God as God's people.

We know one thing. Because of His patience and for no other reason, God loves His people. He loves us. He is waiting so patiently. He wants us to be perfected, to be faithful, to do that hidden work in the wilderness so we can learn how to be those of the spirit and not of the flesh. He wants to train and teach us how to speak the gospel, the Word of God. It is a wonderful day we live in; things are near the end. Now it is for us to be that faithful vessel where the Lord can say, "I am ready to take the link." Faithful, little ones, serving God, hidden life, public life, whatever the Lord wants. I do not say you should go out and do what we are doing in New York. All I am saying is to pray about it—"Lord, how can we preach the gospel and be alive to what You say and how You lead?"

I would like to end with one verse of encouragement. In Matthew 24 our Lord starts talking about His coming and the various circumstances involved, and He says, "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing" (24:45-46).

I do not know what kind of impressive things we have to do. All I know is we need to be faithful to the Lord. We need to obey Him however the Lord has enabled us as assemblies together, praying for one another and helping one another. May it be that when the Lord comes again He finds us so doing; not asleep and not saying, "Oh Lord, the world is so tough out there, we cannot share anymore, we are just waiting for You to come." But may we be faithful publicly and as the Lord deals with us in the inward ways. May the Lord find us as a servant that He can say, "Well done." Come and receive us; find Your bride ready, having sewn all the righteousnesses of the saints into that wedding garment that is now ready for the Lord.

Shall we pray:

Father we thank You so much for John. We thank You so much that we are near the end. Thank You so much for the link that You want to form with us. We thank You so much for Your love for Your children. What patience You bear with all of us for sure. Oh Lord, teach us how to be faithful to You both in our hidden life and public life, that we may be Your servants. Lord, will You give us that voice that can speak regarding the truth of the simplicity of devotion to Christ, of the truth of the foundation and the reality of Christ as the church that we can learn how to speak the gospel of the kingdom of God in these last days! Do help us, Lord, do help us; have mercy upon us. Teach us Your ways. We know we do not have it right yet, but we want to learn. Show us Your ways, oh Lord. Help us to be those who prepare the way for Your coming again. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.