

Less than 8km from the lowest point on the surface of the earth, on the eastern side of the Dead sea, rises some rugged sandstone mountains. “The Hills of Moab”<sup>i</sup>. These hills are on the verge of being desert. They have an annual rainfall of only 100mm, or 4”. And, in these hills today, can be found the remains of a fortress palace which had been built by King Herod.

This fortress palace, called Machaerus<sup>ii</sup> was not only a palace, but it was also a jail. And in it’s dungeons could be found the first prophet that Israel had heard for more than 400 hundred years – John the Baptist<sup>iii</sup>.

You see, prophets usually aren’t very popular people, because they don’t say what’s popular – They say what God tells them to say. And that’s why John the Baptist had been taken from his freedom in the wilderness air, and confined inside this fortress..... He’d spoken against the king. And so John was in prison, and he would stay there until he was eventually beheaded on the whim of the King’s wife and her daughter.

And as John the Baptist sat in prison, he thought upon the prophecies that God had given him about Jesus, and then he thought about Jesus and what **He** was doing....., and John just wasn’t sure.

John had preached: 3:2 "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.**" He preached it with urgency because judgement was on its way. Matthew 3<sup>10</sup> **The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.....** <sup>11</sup> **"I baptise you with water for**

repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. **He** will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.  
<sup>12</sup> **His** winnowing fork is in his hand, and **he** will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

That's what John had preached, and John **had** thought that his younger cousin, Jesus was that one. And yet, when John's disciples brought to him word of what Jesus was up to, he was no longer so sure. Jesus **wasn't** judging. He was healing. He **wasn't** swinging the axe. He was washing feet. He **wasn't** separating. He was seeking. And John looked at all this, and it just didn't add up to him..... And he began to doubt. And these doubts nagged him and nagged him, and so he sent his disciples to get some answers. Are you the one? "**Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?**" Did I have it right, or should I still be looking?..... Ever have questions like that?

And when Jesus gave His answer, it was a typical Jesus answer. He didn't just give a "yes" or a "no". He made John to think about it. He pointed John's disciples towards the evidence, and John could go to his bible – his Old Testament, and check it out for himself....

And, you know what – when **we** do that... when **we** search for the answers in the Scriptures – when we search for truth – rather than just having it spoon-fed to us, – when we find it in the Scriptures ourselves – well that builds a strong faith – faith found by looking at the evidence, and listening to God, rather

than just taking someone else's word for it, is a powerful faith – it's a faith that will stand the test of time.

And so Jesus gave him the evidence. He said "You go back and tell John what you've seen". **The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.** That's what they had seen, and these very acts of Jesus were fulfilling ancient prophecy right before their eyes.

Hundreds of years earlier, Isaiah had said that these things would happen<sup>iv</sup>.

And now they were. They saw it. Evidence. Evidence that Jesus was the one.

They had their answer for John. John **wasn't wrong** about Jesus. When Jesus came to the river Jordan to be baptised, John **knew** that he was "the one". He said so<sup>v</sup>. And John prophesied and preached the need for repentance, for the time was near. The messiah was coming, and He was coming to judge. And John was right,.... but he had his timing wrong. What John didn't realise, and something that Jesus clarified, is that Jesus is coming twice. When Jesus began his ministry, John expected him to be doing the things that, in fact, he will be doing when he comes the second time... And so John began to doubt.

How's that hey? John the Baptist – a great prophet of God – doubted.

When God acted differently to how John expected, the doubts began to niggle.... And so often, the seeds of doubt that we have, begin to surface when we can't see or understand what God is doing. *When a child dies unexpectedly; when the clouds refuse to yield their rain; when our work becomes a disappointment; when our friends desert us* – in times like these, we start to question “Why?”. When we feel that God is behaving in a very un-god-like way. That's when we begin to doubt.

And Jesus' answer was a bit like CSI – follow the evidence – these things are supposed to happen too.

*(Picture: October 1,2,3 of Larsen diary)*

*All we have to do is follow the evidence.*

Isn't God good – the way that he deals with us? Even though John had doubts, Jesus didn't criticise him. In fact, he did quite the opposite. He turned to the people around him, and He told them that John was a good bloke. He made it clear that He and John are both agents of the one God. “John is a prophet – he's more than a prophet”...

The great prophets of old fore**bold** that John would come, and that John would be heralding the arrival of someone even greater. And that's what made John great. John wasn't great because he was a prophet. John was great because of the one that he announced – Jesus Christ.

Jesus said “**Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist**”..... But then He threw in a bit of a surprise. – As important and great and blessed as John the Baptist is, the **least** in the Kingdom of Heaven is **greater** than John the Baptist....

You see, John had not yet entered the Kingdom of Heaven. John didn't yet have faith in Jesus Christ. Although he did these great things **for** God; Although he even languished in prison for God,..... he had not yet put his faith in Christ. And so, although he was great, he had not yet become a part of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I'm reminded of the story of John Wesley's conversion:

*John Wesley spent five years in the seminary. He was a minister of the Church of England for about ten years. He became a missionary.*

*His life was exemplary. He would get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and pray for two hours. He would then read the Bible for an hour before going to the jails, and hospitals to minister to all manner of people. He taught, he prayed, and he helped. And he did this for years*

*But one night, when his life was in peril – the ship he was on was in danger of sinking, he was full of fear – “What'll happen to me when I die?”*

*On one side of the ship was a group of men who were singing hymns. He asked them, "How can you sing when this very night you are going to die?" They replied, "If this ship goes down we will go up to be with the Lord forever."*

*And Wesley went away shaking his head. "How can they know that? What have they done that I haven't?" ..... "I came to convert the heathen, but who shall convert me?"*

*Well, In the providence of God, that ship made it back to England. Wesley went to London and found his way to Aldersgate Street and a small chapel. There he heard a man reading a sermon which had been written 200 years earlier (today they'd say it was stale material). It was a sermon written by Martin Luther. This sermon described what real faith was. Real faith is trusting in Jesus Christ, rather than in our own good works, for salvation.*

*And it hit him. Wesley suddenly realized that he had been on the wrong track all his life. That night he wrote these words:*

*"About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."<sup>vi</sup>*

That night, John Wesley knew that he had entered the Kingdom of Heaven... It wasn't when he went to Bible college. It wasn't when he became a minister. It wasn't when he went off to be a missionary... It was that night, when he trusted Jesus Christ....

And John the Baptist had done many good things for God, and in God's name, but he hadn't yet entered the Kingdom of Heaven.

Friends, here I find both encouragement and warning. I find warning, because many people today become a part of the church because its ideals resonate with theirs. They find the

church to be an organisation which may teach their morals, or carry out good works, and so they join up for this (it's like a service club). They get their children baptised because they need a bit of religion. But they never actually put their faith in Christ. And so there is warning here: The Kingdom of Heaven is unattainable without faith in Christ. John the Baptist couldn't attain it, unless he found faith, and neither can we...

But here's the encouragement: Faith is made possible by a revelation from God. We don't have to try harder to believe – we just have to accept what God has already shown us.

God graciously reveals Himself to those He chooses to reveal Himself to... And in fact, it's often not the high-and-mighty He reveals Himself to, but the lowly and the outcast. It's often not the learned and 'supposedly' wise He reveals Himself to, but to those who have an understanding of a child. Jesus said: <sup>27</sup>..... **no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**

God reveals Himself so we can have faith in Jesus Christ. Did you know, that's what's happening right now? As we read God's word – as we study what God's word is saying, God is making Himself known to you... God is revealing Himself to you..... Why???

Why **does** God reveal Himself???... So that God can be glorified? Yes, but it's more than that... Does He reveal Himself so that we can come to faith in Jesus Christ? Yes, but there's a key component that must go along with that...

## Repentance...

The revelation of God, **requires** us to respond with repentance... There's a lot of 'R's there, isn't there. The revelation of God, requires us to respond with repentance.

You see, John the Baptist preached repentance. And He believed that Jesus would stop that, and step straight in with judgment. And I think John understood very well, that those who hadn't repented.. – .. well, it wouldn't go well for them. When Jesus comes in judgment, the unrepentant, **will** be judged, and the unrepentant **will** be punished...

And John expected Jesus to step straight in with that judgment.... I'm glad he didn't...

You see, 2 Peter 3:<sup>9</sup> **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.** (John thought He was slow) **The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

When Jesus came last time, He did **not** come to judge – He came to save. And He's been delaying His return, revealing Himself to the world, and giving us ample opportunity to repent...

But when Jesus comes next time, there'll be no more waiting.... It could be any day now – we don't know... When I wrote this sermon, I didn't know if I would ever get a chance to preach it, because people will be preaching Christ, right up until the day that He arrives.

That's why we're told to live every day as if it is today that Jesus is returning. ... Our task, is as God reveals Himself and His ways – as He reveals these things to us – our task, is to repent.

Jesus said: <sup>21</sup> "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup> But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. <sup>23</sup> And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. <sup>24</sup> But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Why did Jesus say these things about these places? It's because He performed many miracles in their midst, and they failed to repent. Did you know that's why Jesus performed His miracles – healing the sick, raising the dead, giving sight to the blind???.... He did this, so that people would repent.

Tyre and Sidon, Sodom..... All places that God had judged, in the past.... And they didn't have a very good opportunity to repent.... But these local towns – they did have opportunity. John had preached repentance, and Jesus

preached exactly the same message – repent – and He backed it up with miracles.... But they all had their excuses....

How will it go for Australia, do you think? When Jesus returns – we've been given ample notice... We've heard the message of John the Baptist. We've heard the message of Jesus Christ. For the whole history of St George, there has been God's preachers, here in this town, all warning, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand"....

How terrible judgment day will be, for those who do not repent...

What is repentance???? - I've told you before...

To repent means to change our direction. It means to change our mind towards God. It means to agree with God that His way is best, and to follow Him in His ways...

Repentance means to have a change of mind, a change of will...

Repentance isn't just something we think or feel – it's something we do...

And I'm going to tell you something, which is an offence to many:

Faith without repentance, is not faith at all... Because faith leads to repentance, and repentance leads to faith – they must go together....

We live in an era, when in many churches, you will never hear the call to repentance. 55 times, in the New Testament, we

find the word “repent” or “repentance”... And yet in many churches today, you never hear it preached...

Why is repentance such an offence? Well, to be frank, for many people, in our society, there’s nothing they want to change about their life... The rich, the self confident, the energetic, the leader, the celebrity..... To these, the message of repentance is a nonsense – they like things the way they are...

Do you know who are the most likely to come to the Lord Jesus Christ??? It’s those who are at the end of themselves... Jesus said: <sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

One of the first messages I ever preached at a bush disciples service, was “God calls nobodies”.

You don’t have to be perfect to come to God. You don’t have to be strong; or confident; or wealthy; or smart; or good; or sinless, to come to faith.

Come if you’re tired. Come if you’re burdened. Come if you’re weak. Come if you are in need of rest.... Come if you are at the end of yourself...

Jesus said, <sup>6</sup> ... **blessed is the one who is not offended by me."**

Some of us get offended that God pardons sinners. Some of us get offended that God is delaying His judgment...

But **many** are offended that when God reveals Himself, He requires us to repent.

Turn your back on your old life, and follow Christ. Learn from **Him**. We've spent enough time learning from the world. We've spent enough time, learning from our mistakes. We've spent enough time learning from greed and pride and prejudice and selfishness... Learn from Jesus Christ.

*Somebody once said "Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation."*<sup>vii</sup>

Trust in Him. Put your faith in Jesus Christ, and rely on Him alone.

Questions?

Who would like us to pray for them today?

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<sup>i</sup> (picture p.20 New Bible Atlas & map).

<sup>ii</sup> (Map p.59 Baker Atlas)

<sup>iii</sup> Josephus. Also, Macherus is identified with the present Mukaur, east of the Dead Sea (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>)

<sup>iv</sup> . Isaiah 35:<sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. <sup>6</sup> Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

<sup>v</sup> John 1:29

<sup>vi</sup> [www.holwick.com](http://www.holwick.com)

<sup>vii</sup> (p.60) Rowell EK. Quotes & idea starters for preaching & teaching.1996: Baker.