

Baptisms At The River by J Neil Evans

The warm Judean sun made the wait even longer, but the heat of this summer day was a subconscious thought. The events of this specific day put any hardships out of focus.

Of course Benjamiah and his wife Leah remembered the long, hard, two-day walk from their home in Emmaus near Jerusalem. But, as they stood in the long line winding down the trail to the riverside they felt a growing sense of fresh discovery. Though their minds were full of thoughts they spoke very little, in obvious concert with the crowd around them. It was only at the very back of the crowd that much conversation was heard.

When Ben and Leah had arrived at the banks of the Jordan River earlier in the day there was already a significant assembly gathered. They had been told the crowds were large but they had not anticipated so very many. They were used to the crowds of Jerusalem, especially on Feast days, but those were official times. It is true that the Feasts of Jerusalem were decreed by God, but they were traditions too. The Priests admonished every Jew to go; it was expected, not to be neglected. If you didn't participate in the Feasts, the Priests, the Pharisees, and likely your neighbors would frown on you and eventually wonder aloud if you were really worthy to be one of God's Chosen People.

Benjamiah's family had never missed a Feast in Jerusalem. Whether it was Tabernacles, Lights, Passover, whatever the Feast, they went. His father and mother scheduled their lives around the religious events of the Temple in the Holy City of David. He could not remember when he learned to love Jerusalem and the Law of God, he only knew that when any of the Elders of Israel spoke he listened and obeyed. Of course he had diligently studied the Law of God in the Synagogue school, but the goal was always to "learn the lesson!", "memorize the text!". Not much value was placed on original thought, free thinkers were disciplined not heard.

Leah's husband had learned his lessons well and was beginning his new life with his beloved Leah by faithfully walking in all the footsteps of his father and grandfather. Leah too, was faithful, following the example of her mother and grandmother by dutifully walking with her husband Benjamiah, even though she had frequent silent questions.

As Benjamiah and Leah stood hand-in-hand on this rise just above the water's edge they looked at each other and smiled. It was a smile that said "we don't know all that we are doing, but we know we are doing the right thing." Their glances spoke of the unanswered questions and hollow tradition they each carried in their minds and only recently really voiced aloud.

Both Benjamiah and Leah, like most of those surrounding them at the River's edge, had been reared by parents who earnestly prayed for the renewed glories of King David's Israel. Every day the Roman soldiers and the Gallilean tax collectors reminded them that God's Kingdom was only a hoped-for realm. Even here, a day's walk from any significant city, the Roman soldiers were keeping a suspicious eye on this anxious crowd. For four hundred years the Jews had struggled to regain their independence. Rome merely tolerated the Jew's religion as part of their dictated peace. Why God delayed the promised Kingdom, led by a powerful Messiah, puzzled every Jew who labored under the foreign peace of these Gentile invaders.

The ever present soldiers were certainly a hindrance to the freedom of the Jews, but to the hundreds, and thousands, of people who were coming to this spot on the Jordan River there was another group that was the focal point of their individual and collective regret. In various clusters throughout the crowd were gathered Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders who had come mostly out of curiosity and to keep an eye on their competition.

If you cared to listen, and most of the people here today didn't care, you would hear a familiar heated discussion in these clusters of Pharisees and Scribes. "He has no education," complained one. "No one knows anything about his family," groaned a second critic. "And, he has no right to talk about us this way," whined a priestly dressed man.

At this point we should turn, with the crowd, our attention to the shaggy, unappealing man to whom seemingly all Judea has been attracted these last few weeks. While his name is John, he has become known as "The Baptist". Only the most inattentive people had not heard of the commotion this John was stirring out here in the wilderness, away from the centers of commerce and of religion. At first it had been only a casual rumor concerning some mad man down by the Jordan River. The rumors turned

to intrigue as first an uncle from a neighboring village and then the family from next door confirmed the stories with personal accounts of their own encounter with the strange preacher in the wilderness.

The Jews were accustomed to speakers impressed with their own knowledge. They could look around at some of the familiar Pharisees in the crowd and remember them from Jerusalem where they stood proudly in some prominent place near the Temple and admonished their listeners to follow the Laws of God. Jewish listeners knew inside that there was something missing in the rigid proclamations of these vain leaders. To openly challenge them, or even give much conscious thought to the issue was futile because the only real substitute was to become a Zealot and seek a life-purpose in opposing Rome. Familiar with a life of hard work and submission to callous foreigners, most Jews saw no alternative to the traditional life of sacrifices and laws that governed every detail of their days. For many faithful Jews the dissatisfaction was something that got buried in the constant efforts to keep the religious laws, to please their ancient traditions, and to avoid the harsh attention of the soldiers.

Any newcomer who stepped toward the front of the crowd to hear this John the Baptist speak was arrested by his appearance. He was indeed dressed as a wildman wearing only leather skins. His voice was loud and at times harsh, but he was clearly missing the familiar fascination with himself. Listeners heard a man more concerned with his message and with the listeners than with how he would be elevated in the minds of his growing followers.

John the Baptizer made the comment repeatedly that he was not to be the object of their attraction and admiration. He said: "As for me, I baptize you in water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not even fit to remove His sandals; He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Having first carefully evaluated the man and his style, each new pilgrim would begin to listen to what John was actually saying. If his appearance wasn't shocking enough his words were even more arresting to the proud hearts of tradition-rich Jews. His message was singular, though he said it in many ways, so everyone who would could understand. "Repent!, for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

No heart is so dark as the one that thinks it is fully enlightened. Some who heard this man of the wilderness challenge them to "repent" reflected honestly about the emptiness of their own heart and saw that yes indeed they were more in love with their complex traditions than they were with the God Who gave them. They knew that even though they repeated several times each day the ancient theme "THE LORD OUR LORD IS ONE", they had grown to love saying it more than they loved the One they almost unconsciously described. And even worse, they actually believed that their LORD was most pleased by the wooden recital.

Those who understood what John was saying let their mind wander further in the musty closets of their proud heart. They realized for the first time consciously that their nagging dissatisfaction with their repeated sacrifices at the Temple was that their hope had been in the sacrifices rather than in the God to Whom they were offered. They recalled the multiplied offerings that were given publicly for the real though veiled purpose of impressing all who watched with comparing hearts. They reflected on the pious Sabbath day stillness that revealed more of their self-righteousness than of their deep love for God. They remembered the many times they had neglected helping someone in need with the excuse that it would make them "unclean" for one traditional reason or another.

As Benjamiah and Leah had listened to this Baptist talk they began to see the empty pride that had motivated so much of their religious life. Their heart was opened to the frightening truth that they had trusted in their own religious works to gain favor with a Holy God. Their compulsive repetition of offerings and sacrifices revealed the insufficiency of the very things in which they placed so much hope.

Standing now at the waters edge, Ben and Leah were firm in both repentance and in hope. They knew that they had not been pleasing to God in their traditional religion. They knew that their hope had been for the Messiah to come rescue Israel because they deserved it. They knew now that they had really only hoped in themselves, and such hope had to be finally hopeless. But now they both were ready to step into the water and declare for all to hear and see that their hope was no longer in themselves but in the God of their fathers Who wanted their humble hearts more than He wanted their superficial works.

The man in front of them waded out to where John was waist deep in the clear water of the Jordan River. The Baptizer asked: "Why are you here?" The middle aged man replied quietly but firmly, "I too am tired of making all the religious sacrifices." "I want to admit openly that I have been trying to be righteous for the wrong reasons." "I believe the Messiah will come rescue us soon."

In actions that were familiar to all Jews who ceremonially cleansed cooking utensils, their hands, and new converts by baptism, John lowered the man into the water, held him submerged for a brief moment and lifted him out again. Before John could even conclude his personal comments to the man a dozen Pharisees broke through the crowd and moved to the front of the line. Ignoring Benjamiah and Leah, they announced confidently not just to John but to the entire crowd that they too had come to be baptized.

In a voice equally confident, but coming from somewhere purer and higher, John spoke also for both the Pharisees and the crowd to hear. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" "Therefore, bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance." And, knowing their pride in being descendants of Abraham, he continued: "and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." "And also the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

It was not John's words that condemned them. It was their response that revealed the words were right on target. Even before John could finish, the intruders exposed their hearts to everyone but themselves as they haughtily turned and pushed back through the crowd and made their way to a safe place where they could continue their hostile criticism of both the renegade preacher and his foolish throng.

Any reluctance that Ben and Leah might have harbored was now gone. They had heard their own hearts described in John's words and seen their own former attitudes demonstrated by the blind Pharisees. Their repentance was genuine. First Benjamiah and then Leah was baptized by John uniting them with the growing number who admitted that their religion was rooted in pride not humility, in offering not in need, in illusion not in substance, yes, in sin not in righteousness. They stood together dripping wet, with the waters of Jordan soaking their robes and the tears of

repentance running down their faces. They longed more than ever for the Messiah. But now their longing was for more. Sure, they still wanted desperately to be free of Rome, but they yearned too to be free of the bondage of their own sin. And if what John said was true, that "the Kingdom of God is at hand," then their new found hope was on solid ground.

In the long wait, as their hearts had spent the time in inward focus, Benjamiah and Leah had been only politely aware of the man inching toward the water with them. He had patiently stood behind and beside them for the last several hours and now it was his turn in line. As the man walked toward John a very strange thing happened. John's whole countenance changed. Only those at the water's edge heard him protest. "No, I can't baptize you, I need to be baptized by You, how can you come to me?" The two stood for a moment intently gazing at each other. The stranger broke the silence. "Permit it at this time", he said, "for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

He stepped forward, the Baptist awkwardly and with even greater humility, gently baptized the man as the crowd strained to see and hear what they immediately knew was something unusual. Not lingering the man walked away from John, hesitated only slightly at the waters edge and walked away into the crowd. People tried to watch both the Baptist and the stranger at the same time, for they each compelled attention. Those who watched John saw him look heavenward as if something wonderful had caught his eye. He searched the sky and mumbled something about "...how beautiful!..." then bowed his head and cocked an ear as if listening intently. For a long time the Baptist watched the stranger walk away through the crowd. He repeated to himself at first, and then in a louder voice, filled with awe, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

The audience was silent in the drama of the moment. John himself broke the silence with the announcement of a recess. Telling the people to rest for awhile, he waded across the Jordan and disappeared in the rocks on the far bank. There was much discussion the next hour before the Baptist returned. It was generally suggested that he too must have been puzzled in the recent event and needed time to think.

Benjamiah and Leah were as curious as anyone for they had been standing beside the man all day. He had spoken little, he just listened and

watched. When they asked he did mention that he had come from Galilee. It would be several years before they fully understood what they witnessed this day on the banks of the Jordan River.

The young couple returned home full of excitement and hope. They anticipated a warm reaction from their family and friends but would be disappointed. Their hope remained firm and grew as the story of the Baptist and the Stranger worked out around them in the next few years. The lives of Benjamiah and Leah were changed forever by their experience at the River. They were no longer satisfied with mere ceremony, they truly longed for the coming Kingdom of God. No...! They longed for the King Himself. And they were not disappointed.

"Again, the next day John was standing, and two of his disciples; and he looked upon Jesus as He walked, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus."

Are you following the One Who is indeed the Lamb of God Who takes away our sin?