

Were the Old Testament Saints Born Again?

The Least in the Kingdom is Greater Than John the Baptist

Peter Ditzel

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Matthew 11:11

For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

Luke 7:28

The above words of Jesus are puzzled over and wondered about by many. How can John the Baptist be both the greatest and less than the least? To answer this question, we must understand 1) Jesus' comparison of two births, and 2) who John the Baptist was.

Two Births

I recently read the following concerning Internet connections: "*Even the slowest broadband connection is faster than the fastest dial-up connection.*" Now, suppose the fastest dial-up service is offered by the XYZ Telephone and Dial-up. I could then say, "Among dial-up connections, there is none faster than that offered by XYZ Telephone and Dial-up. But the slowest broadband connection is faster." In the first sentence, I am comparing XYZ's dial-up service to all other dial-up services, and it comes out the winner. But in the second sentence, I am comparing XYZ's dial-up service to broadband, and it is not even in the running. In fact, it is true to say that dial-up service is not broadband.

Jesus' statements about John the Baptist are similar. He says that among those born of women, there is not a greater. I have been born of a woman, and you have been born of a woman. If that is as far as it goes, John the Baptist is greater than we are. But we know from John 3:3, and other Scriptures, that there is another birth. In that verse, Jesus tells the Pharisee, Nicodemus, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again [*anōthen*—"from above"], he cannot see the kingdom of God." In John 3:5, Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot

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enter into the kingdom of God." Whatever we might think "born of water" means (some say it means water baptism, others say it is the amniotic fluid of natural birth, still others say it refers to the cleansing aspect of the Spirit), we all surely agree that being born of the Spirit refers to being born again. Those who are not born again cannot enter the kingdom of God. Those who are born again do enter the kingdom of God. In the verses quoted at the beginning of this article, Jesus says that those who are least in the kingdom of God—therefore, those who are least among those who are born again—are greater than John the Baptist. Jesus' statement about John is telling us that among natural humans—those born only of women—none is greater than John, but even the least of those born again from above is greater than John. What does this tell us about John?

The Last of the Old Testament Prophets

In Matthew 11:13-14, Jesus says, "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come." Luke 16:16 tells us something similar: "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it." In Luke 1:17, the angel told John's father, "And he shall go before him [Christ] in the spirit and power of Elias [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."

The law and the prophets is another name for the Old Testament (see for example, Matthew 7:12; 22:40; Acts 13:15; and Romans 3:21). Its time was until John. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. His mission was to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. As a part of that mission, he preached, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). So, the Old Testament was until John, and since that time the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God is preached, and people are pressing into it.

But how do people press into it? Can we enter the kingdom of God by merely being born of a woman? No. We just read what Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see [*idein*—"see," "perceive," "discern"] the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). And, in John 3:5, Jesus explains further, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Only those born again can discern and enter into the kingdom of God.

Where Does This Leave John the Baptist?

The answer is inescapable. Jesus said that among natural human beings (those only born of women) none was greater than John. But he also said, "Notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." No one can be less than the least and still be in the kingdom. There can be no escaping the fact that Jesus was saying that John the Baptist was not in the kingdom of heaven.

I think that many Christian teachers and writers have avoided facing this biblical teaching because, to them, it suggests that John the Baptist was not saved or is not in heaven. But the kingdom of heaven that Jesus announced is not life in heaven. It is life right now under the New Covenant (for more information, read, "The Gospel of the Kingdom of God" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/gospelkingdom.htm>). And being saved is not the equivalent of the kingdom of heaven. Quite simply, all born again Christians in the kingdom of heaven are saved, but not all of the saved are born again Christians. Certainly, the Old Testament saints, including John the Baptist, had the Holy Spirit. Scriptures such as Psalm 51:10-11 tell us that. But being born again is more than being saved and having the Holy Spirit. It is being born into the kingdom of God, an entity that God established under the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, God's kingdom was the physical kingdom of Israel. But God took that nation from them and gave it to a new nation, spiritual Israel, the kingdom of God of the New Covenant (Matthew 21:43).

So, I think that John the Baptist helps us to better understand the Old Testament saints. They lived under the Old Covenant, they had the Holy Spirit, and they were saved by faith—looking forward in faith to the promise of the Messiah. But they were not born again or born from above into the kingdom of God that we born again Christians under the New Covenant now live in.

Okay, I know that what I am saying is new. I don't expect you to take my word for it. Frankly, I never expect you to take my word for what I say. One of the major purposes of this website is to stimulate Bible study. So, look into it, and let me know what you think—pro or con. I'd love to hear from you.