

John's Journey

By Tom Stephens

You know the story as well as I. In the beginning, inside his mom's womb he leaped for joy at the witness of the Holy Spirit when the unborn Jesus came in the room. But now he's a man. He cried out to a lost world about the One whose shoes he was unworthy to unlatch. He was bold that way. He loved to warn men of their sins—transgressions against God, that is. He proclaimed righteousness through the One Who was to come after him. The day that prophecy came true and he saw the dove as a witness of His glory was by far the greatest high John the Baptist ever felt!

But that's changed now. John had cried out condemnation to the hypocrites and political corruptions in the government of that day. So the evil Herod had him arrested and imprisoned in this underground hell-pit. That's where we are now.

Let's ask John. He'll describe the pit.

"Well, first of all I can barely see my hand touching my nose except for that little bit of light that comes through a tiny window near the top of this room. Yea, that's how thick the blackness is. To be in this darkness as long as I have been and still see no visual adjustment to the dark...well, it's a little scary. But, you know, what I really am concerned with now is my emotions. I can't describe the horrors I feel. Yet I'm so positive about this one thing. I know Him. My soul is full of worship for Jesus!"

"Well, John don't forget He never promised you an easy road. It's not always cool sailing, you know. And He did say He'd never leave nor forsake you, not ever. He promised to continue forever. And He will. You know that, don't you John?"

"I can't bear to talk about this place. It's so humiliating here. Even before I entered the long tunnel that led to this hole, I smelled the awful stench of human waste and urine. It's like acid to my throat...and nauseating. Vermin—rats, mice, roaches, and scorpions. They live here with me. They attack me if I close my eyes to sleep. If I sleep at all, I must stand on my feet! I lean my head to the wall as I stand so I don't have to lie in the damp mud. I have a small cot but it's as bad as the floor. It appears that at the beginning, men tried to bury their waste, but gave up."

"John, what about the ventilation.. Is there no fresh air?"

"High up on the exterior wall there's a small window. Not large enough to put your head out. I can just reach it when I stand on the little box I must use to sit on. That is, I can reach it just enough to pull myself up to talk to my disciples. You know, they are the only ones who've visited me. With mom and dad gone, my disciples are the only ones left."

"Listen John, you left Him out. Did you mean to do that?"

"I really don't know what I mean to do. You see, I put my entire life into my Savior. I would give my life for Him. But I never realized it would end like this! You see, I still trust in Him. I know by God's special revelation to me He's my Savior...the Savior of the world. I know that; but my flesh tells me I'm not sure, and there's this horrible war going on within my soul I just can't keep the peace I know I should have!"

"But John, don't you suppose that's exactly what He wants of you? You know, to give yourself without reservation?"

"Of course, I know that's true. I know in my heart He wants all men to come to Him...and to be willing to die for His cause. But if He's really the King of all Israel, wouldn't His power be manifested in the face of Rome? Why is my ministry to man finished? What will happen to me now? Man, I'm confused. I don't know anymore. God... my God! The horrors of this place! What's happening to me?"

"I don't know, John. I wish I could help you. I can see you are truly tormented."

"You don't know the half!" John began to weep, then said, "Two of my disciples came by last evening to try to comfort me. You know what I told them to do? I said to them, 'go, and find Jesus, and ask Him if it is He we are waiting for...or should we expect someone else.' I feel I have forsaken Him. My heart tells me it's really Him. I feel I must die soon; but wait, my two disciples are coming!"

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John the Baptist was imprisoned in a desmoterion, a 'place of bonds'. This was at Herod's fortress at Machaerus in Peraea, east of the Dead Sea, where two dungeons have been discovered, one still showing traces of fetters. Phylake, a 'place of guarding', is the most general and frequently used term. It suggests a place where the prisoners were closely watched. John never left the dungeon. Herodias, the new wife of Herod had a daughter who, after dancing at the King's birthday party, asked for John's head on a platter. That request was honored and John was ushered through the portals of heaven.

In the New Testament are four related terms translated "prison".

- 1. John the Baptist's cell** - "place of bonds" (Matthew 11:2)
- 2. The apostles arrested in Jerusalem** - "place of custody/public watching" (Acts 5:18)
- 3. Peter was imprisoned in a "house"** (Acts 12:7)
- 4. Paul and Silas were thrown in a "place of guarding"** (Acts 16:23-40).
 - Prisoners survived on the bread and water "of affliction" (1 Kings 22:27).
 - Prisons were used to conceal the slain (Jeremiah 41:7).
 - A way to slay a man without bloodshed (Jeremiah 38:6).
 - Joseph was cast by his brothers into a pit on the Plain of Dothan (Gen. 37:20,27).
 - Samson was held in prison at Gaza (Judges 16:21, 25).
 - King Ahab had a prison at Samaria (1 Kings 22:26,27).
 - Prisoners held by conquering armies (Jeremiah 52:11).
 - Hebrew prophets often cast into prison by kings 2 Chron.16:10—Hanani by King Asa.
 - A holding place for those awaiting punishment/execution (Acts 5:21, 23; 4:3; 5:18).
 - Imprisonment as a form of punishment (Acts 22:19).

Because of the number of times the apostles were imprisoned, Roman prisons are more fully described in the New Testament than prisons of other nations. Roman authorities used imprisonment to control behavior (Matthew 18:30) and as punishment for minor lawbreakers (Matthew 11:2; Acts 16:26). Prisons were usually part of the government headquarters: examples are the PRAETORIUM at Jerusalem (Mark 15:16) and the caesarea prison in Herod's judgment hall, where Paul was detained for two years (Acts 23:35; 24:27).

Most prisons of the ancient world were crude and dehumanizing. Many of these prisons were underground with long, sometimes up to one-quarter mile tunnels to the cell. Dark, damp and gloomy, these prisons were too cold in the winters and too hot in the summers, and were often infested by rats and other varmints wanting their next meal.

Food was served in meager portions, usually enough to keep a man alive, or not enough to keep him alive, determined by the judgment placed on him. Human waste was not always disposed of properly and on schedule, causing damp, ranky odors and unsanitary conditions. The inmates' worn and tattered clothing often carried odors similar to that which permeated the cells. If there was a window, it was small and commonly placed above the reach of the inmate, preventing him from taking advantage of fresher air since circulation was already poor. A ragged and dirty cot may have been the only piece of furniture to rest on, and likely doubled as a hoist to the window.

An exaggeration? Maybe. Then, maybe not. Why not consider with me the anger set against John, not only by Herod and his crowd, but also of the Jewish leaders who were criticized by John before he was placed in the dungeon. Outside of Jesus, His disciples and their followers, John likely had no friends.

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It may be an exaggerated description of John's incarceration to finalize his ministry as coming from my pen, as extreme as it may be. I feel the average citizen today who might find himself imprisoned as John was, would definitely be defined with terrible fear and uncertainty. Yet, on the other side, it's more likely that John the Baptist was a man of extreme courage and peace. I believe he would have proven to be faithful to the very end without ever being offended in His Saviour. Jesus, for some reason declared John's business on earth to be "finished in grand order".

In Luke 7:22, 23, Jesus never indicated in any way the direct reason John's Journey was completed.

Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. (Luke 7:22-24)

For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. 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. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. (Matthew 11:10-12)

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