



Enlisted-Part 5
John: God's Leader in Training
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Well, we've been studying through the first chapter of Luke and doing it a little differently than you might expect. And that is because the story keeps weaving these important characters in and out of the text. So we've really taken this chapter—80 verses—and we have decided to look at the characters throughout the book. We started with Luke himself. We looked at Zechariah, we looked at Mary, we looked at Elizabeth. This is week number five now in chapter one, and though it is a bit of a precursor to a lot more of what we'll see from this guy, the fifth person we want to look at this morning is John—John the Baptist, as he's called.

He's not "the Baptist" because he goes to a Baptist church, you understand that? "Baptist" is what he's called—at least that's a shorthand form—because that's what he did. He immersed people. That's what "baptize" means—to immerse. He immersed people in water, dunked them in water as an external sign that they were repentant and prepared to receive the Christ who was coming after him. And so that practice, which was a new practice for the New Covenant, was something that he was known for, and he was initiating that. And so we call him John the Baptist.

Now, I don't want to steal all the thunder from where we're going in chapter three, because that's where Luke opens up this entire window into his ministry. We get to see his powerful ministry, his preaching—we'll sample all of that when we get there. But there's enough said about John in this first chapter of Luke that we need to really, you know, take some time to look at it. A lot of it is even before he's born, but there's a lot of discussion about him. There's even this leaping around and kicking in the womb that we see. And it's all this interesting talk about someone before he's even born. And then his childhood—just brief samples about his childhood—statements that we have to only imagine how that went. But we get these key elements that should allow us to pause here this morning. So, you know, let's look at this guy.

Now, because it's about a young child and even pregnancy, if you're a parent or assumed-to-be parent, I'm assuming there are some things in this text that you can glean and immediately apply, perhaps be challenged by—even though John is a very unique figure, we can learn some things about raising our kids. But even if you're not, I think we need to remember that Jesus said that John was the greatest. He's the greatest personage in all of the Bible up until this point. And that's a huge statement. So no matter what we learn from the life of John, I think for us to stop and say, "Whatever was going on in his life—if there's anything replicable there, I'd like to do that," because Jesus says this guy is the greatest. So we want to look at his life today.

And let's return to our text. Some of this we've read already, I understand. We've studied with some detail, but return with me to Luke chapter one, verse 13, as we pick up the story here again of

Zechariah being told by the angel Gabriel that he was going to go home and have this child with his wife, Elizabeth. And let's focus today on what the angel said—God's messenger said—about the life of John the baptizer.

Verse 13: the angel says, "Zechariah, don't be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord." As Jesus goes on to say, the greatest up to that point in biblical history. "And"—some things about how you raise him—"you must not drink any wine or strong drink." And, interestingly enough, "he'll be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb."

Now you remember that text there we looked at last time—verses 39 through 45—where it talks about the visit from Mary up north in Galilee. She comes down from Nazareth to see Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea, south of Jerusalem, southeast of Jerusalem, and they have that whole exchange. You get these two babies prenatally kicking inside and all this stuff going on—really weird, you know, two pregnant women having this strange moment there. That was interesting. And now it says that he was filled with the Holy Spirit as a preborn kid. "He'll turn many"—right, when he grows up—"he'll turn many of the children of Israel toward, or to, the Lord their God, and he will go before him"—that is, the Lord his God is coming in the person, the incarnate Christ—"in the spirit and power of Elijah." That's what John will do. His ministry will be one that will be reminiscent of the ministry and the powerful ministry of Elijah. "To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just—to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

Now that—just to get started here—is an interesting, lengthy description of someone that is not even born yet, and a description about what he's going to be in terms of God's special plan, even before he's born after his conception in the womb. That's an interesting thing to hear God talk about—or is it? Or is it bad if I could—you start looking for this. Though there are some unique things said about John prenatally, you start looking in the Bible from beginning to end for discussions about people prenatally—you'll find a lot of discussions.

And here's an interesting thing about God: God never calls the prenatal child an "it." Have you noticed that? There's a lot of pronouns—"you," "him." You'll see a lot of discussions about these preborn children as people, individuals, persons, treated as though they're actual people before they're born. That's an interesting statement. You can go back to the whole discussion about the fights going on—the kicking and tussling between Jacob and Esau, remember that?—all the way to the New Testament when Paul talks in Galatians about him before he was born, and God's dealings with him and what God had chosen for him. And you can stop along the way and think about David or Jeremiah or plenty of other examples of God talking about, and speaking about with dignity and personhood, people before they're born.

And we would be remiss if in this text we didn't stop and at least make that observation—that God seems to treat these preborn children as significant lives. Would you jot that down? Number one, if you're taking notes—and I wish that you would today—jot this down: we need to affirm the significance of the preborn. Because God does. And that's the pattern. You need to understand that when the Bible talks about life before birth—life before the first breath—those lives are spoken of with the dignity and the respect of real human beings. That shouldn't surprise us; we find it everywhere.

Keep your finger here in Luke chapter one and turn back with me, if you would, to Psalm 139. In our summer study, we looked at Psalm 139, and we quickly went through this middle section, verses 13 through 16, without a lot of comment about the preborn. And the reason that happened was, if you remember that particular study, the psalm—it's a lot of verses to cover—what we were dealing with is the whole purpose of the psalm; and to exegete that and expose it from the pulpit with integrity, and to say what the text is saying, what we really needed to understand was the underlying problem of the righteous being frustrated with the prosperity of the wicked and the injustice in society. And part of what was being said in this part of the lyrics of the psalm had to do with the fact that God knows you—knows everything about you. He knows everything about us when we're dealing with and grappling with the frustration and angst of that injustice. And so we dealt with that, because that's what the purpose of the psalm is all about.

But I was itching, really, to get to the place where we could talk about the implications of what's being said in verses 13 and following—which we didn't do—which really would have been a sermon within a sermon. But here, when we hit Luke chapter one, we see all this discussion about a preborn baby, even so dignified as God infilling—indwelling—that child before birth with the Holy Spirit, which is a unique thing we've got to figure out a little bit later in the sermon. But even that: this is not a blob of tissue, right? This is to God a human being.

Psalm 139:13: We read this in the summer, but look at the implications of this as the psalmist—David in this case—speaks about himself, and he says, “You formed my inward parts.” Notice again, you'll see personal pronouns all the time—second person when we're talking about someone else, first person when the person is referring to himself under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, talking about his life prenatally. “You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.”

“My frame was not hidden from you”—right? We lead into this paragraph with a whole discussion that darkness is nothing to God, right? He sees everything. Then in this case he says, “My frame—my little tiny embryonic skeleton—was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth”—right, that's just poetic. Now, I understand that. This

is a euphemism for the womb. “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; and in your book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.”

The potential here for the human life in the womb—spelled out by God’s decree in heaven before any of it got started. The significance of the preborn starts with the fact that God creates these little children. “Children are a heritage from the Lord,” Psalm 127 says. He is actively involved in creating them. We’re not deists here, you understand. God, according to Acts 17, is the God who gives us life and breath and everything else. You may say, “Wow, I thought he kind of wound this thing up, and all the genetic material and all that goes on in reproduction—that’s just kind of wound up and he let it go.” That’s not what the Bible teaches. Well, that may be the immediate cause of what’s happening as the differentiation of cells takes place and all the chromosomal structure of that child begins to grow and form all the different parts. But in reality, the Bible says God is the ultimate cause of that. He oversees that. “In him we live and move and have our being,” as Acts 17 says. As Colossians 1 says, “In Christ all things hold together.” He’s the architect of every new life.

And because the Bible continually speaks of that preborn life as human life, it’s important for us as Christians to say, “Well, then that makes sense that when the Bible speaks to problems with the prenatal child—with that preborn person—it speaks, even with punishments and judicial laws, as though that person is a full-fledged human being with all of the dignity and rights of a human being.”

Let me give you one example of that as we go back to Exodus chapter 21. Leave this text, if you would, and notice this is not unusual at all. As a matter of fact, there are laws on the books today that are just like this in the United States of America. Though advocating continually for abortion on demand—entire movements in our country to support that, I mean platforms of political parties—for this reason, you’ve got to understand that in the Bible, when it comes to the preborn, there is a concern of the dignity and respect applied to that baby that is given as though this baby were an adult—full-fledged. This is not a mass of tissue.

Exodus 21:22: “When men strive together”—that’s the archaic way to talk about fighting—this fight breaks out, pregnant woman standing by gets hit, right, so that her children come out.” Right—there’s this child that comes before the time. “But there is no harm”—the child’s okay, right? “So that the one that hit her shall surely be fined,” right? Certainly, there’s a penalty to pay, “as the woman’s husband shall impose on him”—right? He comes before the leaders of Israel. And remember, all these rules have to be established because we’re no longer in Egypt; we can’t go to the Egyptian courts and solve our disputes. Now we’re in the desert, we’re wandering around, we’re going to be a new nation, we need some rules. And so they go to the elders of Israel, the judges of Israel. And as the judges adjudicate the dispute, they’ll pay the fine as the judges determine. But the husband should come and say, “Hey, this is a problem. Look what happened.”

Now, that's if there's no harm to the child. Verse 23: "But if there is harm, you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." This was the *lex talionis* of the day, which was: there's got to be an equal distribution of penalty for the perpetrator that does the crime, based on the effect that he's caused and the consequence in the life of someone else. If that child dies, then there is "blood guiltiness," as the Bible puts it, on the one who caused that death, and there will be, as it comes before the judicial courts of Israel, the penalty of life for life—as the old saying goes, which is the rest of this whole adage, right? Tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn—whatever the damage is, it needs to be brought on the one who brought it.

Now, this is not unusual—not only is it not unusual today, it's not unusual even in the time—this is 15th century BC. You can go back to the 17th–18th century BC in the Babylonian cultures. The Hammurabi Code—some of you are familiar with that—law codes there also do the same. If someone causes someone to miscarry, then there is a penalty that is in the Hammurabi Code that is meted out on the one who causes it. Tiglath-Pileser—the Persian king... I mean, this was much later, but still in Old Testament times, right? Several centuries before Christ. Same thing. Even if—here's what took place—Persian law codes said even if you, as a woman, decide that you want to abort and you do something that causes your own child to abort and miscarry, you will be fined and penalized before the Persian laws.

The Greek cultures—I mean, we still carry a lot of the ethics even in the medical profession. You remember the old Hippocratic Oath, right? In the original Hippocratic Oath—look it up—the Greek culture said that if a doctor gives any kind of remedy to a lady that causes her to abort, he shall be fined. That's the wrong thing; you will promise and swear on oath that you will not give what was called an abortive remedy.

And same thing goes today—if you're a pregnant woman and I shoot you so that your baby dies, I can be prosecuted for murder. Matter of fact, if I shoot you and you both die, I can be prosecuted for double murder. But you do understand the illogical culture in which we live—that that mother has the right to kill that child with impunity. Right? She has a choice—we call it "the choice." She has to be able to take the life of her own child and no one will say a word about it. As a matter of fact, it is championed not only in our culture and not only in political parties that want your vote, it is also championed in the church today. And this is the thing that should make you sick.

People in the name of Christ continue to promote this kind of "freedom of choice," they call it. Anne Lamott—familiar with her books? A lot of books written, a lot of young gals read her books. You go to Christian Book Distributors (CBD), one of the biggest book distributors for Christians in the world, and they're out there pumping her books. Websites all about her. In an interview in the *LA Times* she said this—she said, "As a Christian and a feminist"—this is in an article she wrote supporting the right to choose to abort your own children—"I had to speak out for women," and she's celebrating this, "whose lives have been righted and redeemed by *Roe v. Wade*." Righted and



redeemed by the legal right in 1973 that the Supreme Court handed down that said you can kill your child with impunity. You have the right to do that. Someone else kills your child, right? Then they can be prosecuted for murder, as it's been throughout civilized law codes from the time of the Babylonians, through the Persians, and the Israelites, and the Greeks, and you name another culture that was civilized—handing down rules that you dare not kill an unborn child. Since 1973 we've enacted that law and Anne Lamott celebrates it with biblical language—we've been “redeemed and righted” to be able to have this ability.

Now, it's funny how we're defending that choice. I have a choice to take a gun out and kill you this morning—that could be my choice. No one is defending the right for me to do that, right? I could take my car and I could slam it into your car just for fun. No one's defending my choices. But in the choice that's been so wrapped up in the philosophical debate about a woman's freedom, now we say that she has the right to do this.

And since 1973—50 million children legally aborted in this country. Fifty million. Can you imagine that number for just a second? I mean, think about that for a minute. We have on average between 1.37–1.5 million legalized American abortions every single year. I mean, that's like 4,000 a day that are taking place in our country. Now we have—what was it?—2,753 people killed in the Twin Towers and the world stops, the press is stopped, and we mourn that for weeks. You do understand that's taking place every day in our country. And the only difference is we don't have their pictures on a wall and stories to tell about them because they're all killed in secret. They're all murdered in secret.

This is a problem, people. Think about this. When we look at Hitler as the despicable, ultimate person that we hate because, in part—as the Nuremberg Trial said—he killed six million Jews, you understand your kid can't matriculate through high school without the United States of America sanctioning, championing the death of more than six million babies. This is happening all the time. You do understand that it's gotten so bad now that one quarter of the pregnancies in our country—one quarter of the conceptions—end with the abortionist's tool carving that child out of a mother's womb. You do understand that in Manhattan alone—you hear this stat that came out last year—41% of the conceptions end in abortion. Forty-one. We're pushing toward half. And since half of the pregnancies are unexpected, think about this now. That means that half of the unexpected babies that are conceived—half of those—if a quarter of the entire conceived population of babies are aborted, that means half of those who say “Whoops, surprise, didn't know I was pregnant”—half of them end in the murder of abortion.

The significance of the unborn is something that we need to be teaching in-house, not just externally, in part because it's become a bit of a philosophical discussion now. And I used to stand up years ago and talk about abortion. I look back at my notes from the 1980s when I preached on abortion, and I talked about the debate that was going on in the day about the humanity of the child. Is the baby human? Because that was the real touchstone. And that was: if you could try and show



that this is a human child, then you win the argument. That doesn't work anymore, see, because no one's really debating that.

What's going on because of the scientific advancements—and, I mean, it may still happen on the street corners and in Starbucks—but you go on college campuses, you talk to professors, you talk to people “in the know” in the debate—no longer do we even debate the fact that this is a human being. Everyone agrees we have a human living being that is growing in the womb. It is alive. It is independent of the mother, scientifically. It is a human being.

Now the discussion has shifted from that to the philosophical discussion of personhood. We can no longer debate scientifically that we don't have a human living, independent person inside a woman's womb. Now the debate becomes: is this really a person? Now it's funny for a society that is so dead set on science determining everything, right—how now we've decided to let the philosophers figure out what is worthy to be deemed as personhood. And while it has shifted the argument, the argument's no different because my question was, 25 years ago: who's going to determine what's human? And who's going to determine what's personhood? Who's really going to determine that?

You have to—if you do not do it at the moment of conception—if you do not recognize that, because everything scientifically is human, you're going to have to say, “Well, at some other point we will then determine, based on behavior, performance, or whatever we feel is worthy of life, we will say then that that is worthy of personhood, and then we'll protect that life.” Now, that all goes out the window if someone shoots you and kills your prenatal child—we'll go and prosecute that guy. But we—it's interesting how those will start invoking things like viability. You can take any of the babies from our nursery this morning, and if you go put them out anywhere on their own, they are not viable to live, you understand that. But if you go and kill those babies, you're a multiple murderer, and you will be on the front page of the Orange County Register. You understand none of these arguments make any sense if you do not define life—human life, personhood—as beginning at conception. You're left to let some guys in robes determine not legal scientific issues, but philosophical matters for you. I thought that's what they hate about us, right? That we're not supposed to be doing that—we're not supposed to philosophize about what the law should be. Are we really ready to concede this?

“Well, Mike, you need to be preaching this in front of an abortion clinic.” Really? You know that two-thirds of the people that get abortions today claim some religious affiliation, right? Almost half of them claim to be Protestant Christians, right? This is a problem. This is a problem that needs to be taught in church.

Hans Küng—one of the liberal (I mean, let’s call him what he is) Catholic theologians—says this about this dichotomy: “A fertilized ovum,” he says, “evidently is human life, but it’s not a person.” When you start making that false dichotomy here, we’ve got a big problem in our country, right? We’re no longer recognizing things that are so inextricably bound together in any other area. We now begin to let somebody else decide what life is worth living and what life is not worth living. That’s a big, big deal. I’m not ready to concede that, and neither should you—for any reason, in any situation. For any reason, in any situation.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Mike. There might be some good reasons to have an abortion.” Let’s talk about this. For all this stuff we hear about “choice,” I’m going to give you the choices and the reasons that people make this choice—the mantra of choice. I get it. Why is this choice being made? International survey—here it comes. These are ladies that get abortions: “Why did you get the abortion?”

26%: “I want to postpone childbearing.” Okay. You understand what that means—that abortion is a form of birth control. I mean, that’s the number one reason.

Second reason: 21% say, “I can’t afford it. My monetary situation—not what it needs to be. I just don’t have the money.”

14% are willing to kill their baby because they say, “I have relational problems with the father.”

12% say, “Too young,” or “My parents think I’m too young.”

11%—I’m giving you all the reasons—11% say, “I think my child, if I had him, would disrupt my education or my job.”

8% say, “I just don’t want kids,” or “I don’t want any more kids.” Not about postponing—it’s just “No kids for me.”

Now, we’ve gone from 26% “I want to postpone,” to 21% “can’t afford it,” 14% “relational problems,” 12% “too young,” 11% “disrupt things in my life,” 8% “I don’t want kids.” You realize we haven’t talked anything about medical problems yet? You know what you have to get to in the



survey? 3% before we ever bring up the question of, “I think there may be a risk to the fetus.” Three percent. And yet that’s the headline reason, right? “Well, there may be a problem here.”

Which, by the way, is a very personal thing for me. Because I did have a fetus with a problem. Only I didn’t call the fetus an “it.” This was a her. This was our first daughter—my third child—and the doctor, the genetic counselor, even people who called themselves my Christian friends, urged me strongly to abort my daughter because she had medical problems prenatally. This became a very personal thing for me. And everyone said, “Abort, abort”—not everyone, but from places you wouldn’t believe. People who claim the name of Christ, all the way to the medical professionals who oversaw the care of my wife and my preborn daughter.

Now, I don’t have time to get into all that, but I want to let you know it’s a very personal thing. In part for me, it’s not why I hold the position—I held the position before this ever happened—but if you want to read about it, I put a little something together I can’t do from the pulpit very well. You can go to my Facebook page, and I put something together last night on this. And if you’re not your pastor’s friend, I don’t know what’s wrong with you anyway—but go to facebook.com/PastorMike. Okay? It’s a very simple URL—PastorMike. Ask to be my friend; I’ll probably say yes. And go to my page—and hopefully it won’t be too cluttered—and look for a thing called “Stephanie’s Story.” Okay? And what I want you to read on that is a statement—it’s too long for me to read now—and it’s not that long, but it’d be good for you to look at, along with some pictures of my daughter’s problems and her prenatal diagnosis and all that took place. I want you to read something I wrote before my daughter was ever born. This is when I wasn’t sure she was going to survive. People were telling me, “Abort, abort,” from the first hour of the diagnosis. I was told to abort my daughter. Okay? I wrote a response. And you’ll say, “Well, yeah, that’s vindicated because we know your daughter and she turned out not half bad.” Listen—here’s the thing: I didn’t know that when I wrote this. Okay? I’d like you to read it—get in my mind. That’s why I posted some pictures with some comments. But there’s a few paragraphs—like six paragraphs—that I wrote at the head of this album there called “Stephanie’s Story.” You have to click on that. And I’d like you to read it. I didn’t open that up to the public—very personal and private—but since it’s just between you and me, go ahead and do that sometime today, and read that, and at least understand that even at personal cost—even if it meant that my child would be born with severe handicaps, or that my child would not survive more than a few hours, which some people had said—we weren’t going to allow the abortionist’s tools to take my daughter’s life. You can read about that, I trust, at some point.

Now, all that—from seeing that throughout the Bible, from beginning to end, whether it’s Jacob and Esau, Jeremiah, David, John the Baptist, Jesus—whoever it was, there’s no thought of aborting preborn children in the Bible, because every preborn child in God’s revelation is treated with the dignity and respect of personhood.

Think about it: when David said, “I’m conceived in sin” in Psalm 51, it had nothing to do with his mother’s marital status, you understand. This was an issue of the fact that he understood that the



imputation of Adam's sin applied to him—because of Romans chapter five says—that we now are treated with the dignity of actually being qualified as a human being, and the sin of Adam assigned to us prenatally from conception.

There are so many arguments. I even put some books on the back if you want to go a little further on this—if you need to and you're dealing with people that maybe haven't understood this from the biblical perspective. One of the books is Randy Alcorn's book—and this is a condensed book on a bigger book that he wrote; it's a much more affordable book—but that little book, when he talks about "Why Pro-Life?" he says in the beginning of that book, "You know, I was asked to come into a classroom that was promoting abortion with students." And one of the students who wasn't for abortion asked me to come and share the pro-life position. So he comes and he shares his position. The teacher—I think he says he's in his 50s—been teaching in the public schools for decades—said, "Wow, I've never heard the pro-life argument."

Now here's the thing: we have people encouraging our students to have abortions that have never heard a rational, clear explanation about what it means that there is dignity and humanity from the point of conception. We have an educational process that we need to go through so that we can be able to intelligently represent this out there.

Then I should add one more thing, because in a group this size, and preaching this weekend, and all this going on on the television, the radio, and everything else we do here, there are people listening to my voice right now that have had abortions. And now when I speak to this so matter-of-factly about the problem, this can be an overwhelming thing. And maybe you've already been through the guilt of the dollar—maybe you've justified this—but you're hearing this, convicted, guilty. Listen—here's the deal: it's sin—get that. It's an egregious sin—I get that. But one of the reasons it'd be good for you to jot down 1 Timothy chapter 1—because if it's not you, it'll be someone you're dealing with—1 Timothy chapter 1: God, through the pen of the Apostle Paul, makes him write this thing down. He says, "Listen, I was the worst of sinners." He was a murderer, Paul was. He had signed off on the murder of people—just like an abortion. It wasn't that he did the actual killing, but he authorized it with his signature that Christians would die. And he says, "You know what? God chose me—not only to forgive me, but think about it—to write, you know, 13 installments of the New Testament library, to be used in a great way as an apostle of the church." Think this through. He said he did that as an example to those who would believe on Christ—because if he can save Paul, he says, the grace of God is forgiving; the grace of God is merciful; the grace of God can take any person of contrition and grant them grace and forgiveness.

Okay? That doesn't mean he wants you to wallow in guilt for the rest of your life over the decisions that you've made to abort a child. What he wants you to do is to embrace the forgiveness and see the magnanimous grace and character of God that celebrates your forgiveness for all eternity, and allows you to move forward—recognizing that in the past, what you've done has been nailed to the cross.

The celebration of forgiveness is a great thing. It in no way minimizes the responsibility, but it certainly does get us to recognize that we all need the cross. Even if you haven't aborted somebody, right? You do recognize that all of us need the forgiveness that we find in the cross of Jesus Christ.

What about this kid—prenatally treated as a human being, even so much so that he was going to have the Holy Spirit infilling him before he was even born? Before we think about that strange statement, let's look at the text again in verse 15. As he's said to be great—what was it that was going to be great about this person? Well, the greatness is going to yet be seen—we'll see it when we get to chapter three—but here are some ingredients to his greatness, which may sound odd in a place where everyone drank wine. It says in verse 15: "He will be great before the Lord. He must not drink wine or strong drink." We get no commentary on this. It's just: he's not—you're not drinking alcohol.

Which again, if you go to Baja Fresh in Jerusalem in the first century, right, the only thing at the dispenser is wine. It's what you get, right? There's no Mountain Dew, no Pepsi, no sweet black tea lemonade or anything—you got nothing. You just have wine or water. Here's a guy that is instructed by his parents—being instructed by God—this kid can't have any wine. He's going to be raised with no alcoholic beverages. Okay.

"The Holy Spirit"—more on that in a minute. "He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go before him"—the Lord his God—"in the spirit and power of Elijah." John the Baptist—"in the spirit and power of Elijah." He's going to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children—more on that in chapter three—and "the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

Now drop down to the very bottom of this chapter, if you would, verse 80, and tie all these things together: "The child grew," it says, "and became"—love this phrase; underline it if you would—"strong in spirit." And "he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel."

Let's take "strong in spirit," and see if we can't go back up and make sense of some of these other things. "Strong in spirit"—here's something about growing up and having an increasingly strong spirit. You don't get it by going with the flow of traffic. You don't get it by fitting into the culture. You don't get it by being like everybody else. Right? I mean, immediately, God imposes a restriction of temperance on him—of self-denial on him: you can't do something that everybody else is doing—something, by the way, that is usually done in very festive times. I mean, you know, it's the average beverage of the first century. But it's also something that you would bring out—the



special alcoholic beverages—at some kind of festive party. You’re not going to be a participant in any of that.

Which, by the way, is not unusual. If you go all the way back to Numbers 6—you don’t need to turn there—but the Nazirite vow: when God was going to have somebody used for special purposes in the kingdom of heaven, one of the things they weren’t to do is drink any alcoholic beverages. You get to Proverbs 31—if you’re going to be a king or a ruler in Israel, it’s not for you to drink wine; it’s not for rulers to crave beer. That’s what the text says, because this impinges on your ability to do your job the way you ought to. “Give wine to the one who’s perishing; give strong drink to the one who’s dying.” And the New Testament—even it seems those principles, with that special focus on doing the will of God—carried over into the pastor. You remember when Paul had to write Timothy to actually drink some wine? Remember that? “Take a little wine for your stomach.” Why? Because he was not a drinker. He wasn’t going to do it. And here Paul had to say, “Well, listen—the medicinal advantage of your doing this for your stomach—take a little bit every now and then, because that would be good for you.”

What’s the point? The point is that when you find the connection between those that are willing to go against the traffic in morality, oftentimes they’re going against the traffic in some other areas of their life that seem quite mundane. Right? But don’t get me started on alcohol, because I could talk about the present problems of alcohol. But all I want to say is: self-denial is the principle we gain from this text. And that is, if you’re going to be strong in spirit, you better grow up, and you better live your life saying no to some things you have the right to do—but you don’t do them. And they’re things that you would want to do. That’s called self-denial. And you need to get involved in that at some point in your life.

And, by the way, parents—if we’re talking to parents here for just a second—not a bad thing to say, especially to Orange County parents: don’t give your kids everything they want. I know that you say, “Well, of course I’m not going to give them everything they want because I can’t afford everything they want.” Don’t give them everything you could afford to give them that they want. Did you catch that? There are a lot of things that you can give your kids that they want, that you really could afford to give your kids—don’t give them everything they want. Teach your kids from the youngest of ages to say no to something they have the right to do, that they could do, that they could enjoy—but they say no, for the sake of what? Growing strong in spirit.

Right? That’s what fasting, by the way, is all about. Even the principles built into the biblical models of godliness—saying no to something you could have. My old pastor used to say, “Say no to something good every day,” right? Just as a pattern of that. That’s not a bad application of saying, “Okay, I get it. Self-denial is part of the Christian life.” It’s the beginning of the Christian life, isn’t it? “If anyone would come after me”—we quoted this two weeks ago—“let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”

Self-denial. How's your life doing? Let's forget parenting for a second—just you as an individual—denying yourself things that you have the right to do, because you want to live a life of self-denial, moderation, self-restraint, so that you can be strong in spirit. For what purpose? Back up in our text here in verse 16: “He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.” What was the problem in Israel in the first century? Well, same problem we have everywhere all the time—people aren't following God; they're not seeing God as their Lord. See, here's a guy who comes in—he's going to take people that don't do that; they're comfortable—and he's going to bring them to follow God. He's going to turn them.

“He will go before him in the spirit and the”—what's that word? Underline that word—“power of Elijah.” Do you remember the story of Elijah? He had a cushy life, didn't he? (That was a joke. Sarcasm.) No. You remember anything about it? What's the one thing you remember in Elijah's life—the one big thing? What was it? Showdown with the prophets of Baal. What were the numbers there? What were the odds? One to one, right—he took a big prophet of Baal and he just went one-on-one with him? No, man. This was not a fair fight. Not only that, when he did it and he ousted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel—think about it—he now runs down the mountain, down the hillside, and now—what?—he's running for his life from who? The prophets of Baal? No. From who? Ahab and Jezebel—the king and the queen. He was going to be doing his ministry against all odds, with all the pressure working against him.

By the way, if you're going to raise Christian kids in this culture, do you really think that they're going to have it easy standing up for what's right? No. Listen, stop hovering over your children the way you do. What do they call them—helicopter parents? They're gone, right? They're always hovering: “I don't want any discomfort; I don't want any problems; I want to make sure everything's okay; if they have an owie, I want to make sure and kiss it as quickly as possible; let's help, help 'em.” Listen, if your kids don't have the stress and the difficulties of life, they will never grow strong in spirit. And when it comes to the moral issues, the biblical issues, the evangelistic issues—standing up for what's right in a culture that doesn't—you're not going to see a strong spirit in your kid.

Look at the very end of this verse: “He grew strong in spirit.” What's the next line? He did what then? “He was in the wilderness till the day of his public appearance.” In the wilderness. We can't drop our kids off at school without freaking out. Elizabeth and Zechariah bring this kid out into the wilderness. And somehow at night, when they say their prayers—“Well, how's John doing? Have you heard from him?” “No, he hasn't texted me. No, he hasn't emailed.” “Where is he?” “Oh, he's out in the desert.” “What's he...?” “I don't know.” “Does he have everything he needs?” “I'm not sure.” “Oh, let's pray for him.” See, they aren't helicopter parents. They recognize this—there was something about even the place that he was raised.



Do you ever watch that show “Survivorman”? Is that even still on? Survivorman—I’ve never watched it. I’ve slipped by the channel a couple times, and it seems so disconcerting. I certainly don’t want to chill out watching something like that. But I thought of it when I thought about John being raised in the wilderness. I thought, “Wow, I’ve got to check out this guy.” So I went to his website—Les Stroud, Survivorman. Here’s the slogan on his website—I love it: “No food, no shelter, no fresh water, no tools, no camera crew—one man, alone, in the wilderness for seven days.” Can you imagine John? For seven whole days? Oh, you mean the day and the night—all seven? A week? Survivorman.

Right—this kid got dropped off there as a teenager. He’s like the boy raised by the pack of wolves, right? He comes out of the desert eating insects and wearing weird outfits—never been to Kohl’s. Think about it. He comes in looking like a weirdo, and Jesus says, “There’s the greatest guy ever.” Greater than Abraham, greater than David, greater than Elijah, greater than Elisha—you name somebody: Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Isaiah—pick one. “That’s the greatest guy right there.” Why? Because of the strength of his spirit. Where did he learn all that? In part by spending more than seven days in the wilderness.

Now, I wouldn’t want to go toe-to-toe with this Les Stroud—Survivorman guy. He’s tougher than me, I get that. But, I mean, John the Baptist was a whole different kind of Survivorman. And again, if you’re raising kids in Orange County, I know—right? There’s a little drip coming from their nose; you’re there with the cleaner as quickly as possible. “Oh, are you okay? Here: Purell, Purell.” Listen, I just want to tell you—we’re creating weak children, and it’s got to stop.

When I was at University of Arizona as a student, they were doing this thing—they were just getting started on this thing called the Biosphere north of Tucson. Anybody remember that? The Biosphere, which is a weird thing, right? Some weird—seems sci-fi at the time. And they built this big indoor—giant indoor—climate. And they figured some things out ahead of time; they realized, “Well, you’ve got to have some of this—it’s going to make that work, and that’s going to make that work.” And everything was this contained kind of, you know, isolated environment. Well, one problem they had with the Biosphere is that they didn’t plan things like storms. Who would, right? “I don’t know—if I’m going to live in the Biosphere, I don’t want storms in the Biosphere.” Matter of fact, they had nothing—it was, everything was simple and tranquil and nice.

Well, the problem was when the trees grew up in the Biosphere, at some point they just wilted over and broke. They started snapping all over. Why? Well, they realized—the horticulturalists came in—“You’ve got a problem here. Those trees have never been stressed by the wind or the storms—never produced the fibers in their own trunks to produce strength. They collapsed under their own pressure.” Right?



Now, think about how we want to protect our kids. I mean, picture the scientists in the Biosphere with their little watering can, watering the trees. That's Orange County parenting, isn't it? "Good enough to drink? Storm comes?—boohoo. We don't want to stress our kids out." If your kid is not raised with some stress and pressure and a little deprivation in his life—I know that'll be a clip that's reported to Child Protective Services, I get it—but we're creating some real softies, and we are reflecting our culture. And if the Christians don't raise strong human beings who are willing to stand up against the tide of our culture—no wonder we'll get swept away, being conformed by the world.

We need strength. We need to value strength. Have I ever given you the second point? I haven't. Value a strong spirit. Value that. Cultivate that. Make that a part of your life. Make sure that you shoot toward that in your own thinking. We need strong spirits, and we need to work at it. And we need to recognize there's a lot of things that we do, unfortunately, that don't help strength—that create these mamby-pamby, feminized, softer, gentler Christians that do nothing for the kingdom of heaven but fit in. That's not what God's looking for.

I love this verse—I quote it all the time—Proverbs 28:1: "The wicked flee when no one pursues." Right? That wickedness is characterized by cowardice. That's why they're described in the book of Revelation—those who are cast outside the kingdom are "the cowards." But I love the next part of verse one: it says, "But the righteous are as bold as a lion." Think about that. I mean, we are so protective of our own lives and our kids' lives and everybody else's lives that we can't handle any pressure.

It says in Proverbs 24:10, "If you faint in the day of adversity, how small is your strength!" Even a dismissive, disdainful—"How small." You're just a weakling. Why does it matter to be strong? So we stand on a podium and, you know, oil ourselves down spiritually and show off? No, that's not it. Next verse in Proverbs 24:11 says, because we're to "rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter." What's the point? We've got a job to do, and our job isn't easy. And you and I need to have a strong spirit, like John the Baptist, that was so valued by God and Christ himself. Let's be a little stronger than we've been in the past.

And wait till we get to Luke 3—wait till we get to Luke 3, man. You'll read his sermon—when they show up for his church service, he says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come? You snakes!" I mean, think about starting a sermon that way. You guys complain about my sermons being too bold—think about being in his congregation. I'm just telling you—and then Jesus goes, "There—that's the guy right there." It's just a different value system than what we're used to. Value a strong spirit, not a weak one.

Now, let's touch on this—the statement we've avoided here, at least we've talked about it; we haven't dealt with it: bottom of verse 15: he's going to be great in the kingdom of God; must not drink wine or strong drink; “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.”

Now, someone says, “I want to be filled with the Spirit. How do you get filled with the Spirit?” Well, you've got to see your sin problem. You need the gospel, right? You've got to put your trust in Christ. You've got to confess your sin. You've got to repent. You've got to trust in Christ; you've got to call out. This kid hadn't breathed his first breath yet, right? Here's a kid—has done nothing—and he's getting the Spirit in his life. “Well, that doesn't seem right, because you've got to do some things to get the Spirit in your life.” No, you do—I understand that. And that's the biblical equation. Right here is something, though, that is so ironic—that someone whose eyeballs in his head haven't even seen light yet, and this kid is being honored with the indwelling Holy Spirit.

It's not much different than the New Testament commentary on the Genesis description of Jacob and Esau wrestling together. We preached this one—this was a hard passage for us as well. Do you remember in Genesis—or Romans 9, rather—Romans 9 commented on the Genesis account, and it talked about Esau and Jacob, and it said, “Oh, yeah, they were tussling together in the womb.” And that was, you know, a portent for what was going to happen, and that was: these two nations were going to come from those two people—Jacob and Esau. But, you know, even before they were born—and here's how Paul puts it in Romans 9—“before they had done anything, they had no time to do anything right or wrong, the Lord said, ‘The older will serve the younger.’” You remember that? And the very next thing Paul says is, “Are you going to say God's unjust?” Why would we say he's unjust? Because it's not fair—“Let them live their lives, see how they're going to live, and then we'll determine who serves who.” That's how we would do it. And God said, “No, no, no—I've got a plan. And here's my plan: the older—Esau—is going to be subservient to Jacob—the younger. That's how I'm going to do it.” So these two twins—two nations—that's what I'm going to... even before they had done anything. And then Paul asks about that, “How can we say God is just?” That's the conundrum of biblical theology you're always going to grapple with. In this text, we're going to grapple with: how can the guy be blessed with the Holy Spirit when he hasn't done anything to prove that he deserves it? It's called grace, and it's called sovereignty. And it really grates against our understanding of our free will and responsibility. We're stuck with this.

Now, bigger picture—thinking about raising a kid with a strong spirit—perhaps you do. You raise the 21st-century John the Baptist—just to talk big here for a second—does great things for God. Fantastic. Now, you might be tempted to stand back and say, “Look what I did.” Or you become someone reminiscent that has a John-the-Baptist moment at work this week—“Look what I did.” See, there is something overriding all of our intentions, and as difficult as it is for us as autonomous human beings to recognize it, it's called the sovereignty of God, and we need to acknowledge it in everything that happens.

Number three in your outline: acknowledge God's sovereignty in all that takes place. How is it that John turned out to be who he was? Because from the beginning, God overshadowed him with the Spirit—guided his life.

Once you jot that down, I want you to look at verse number 66. We haven't even read this one yet, but it's part of our text this morning as we think about John. Now remember the setting here—they had the whole thing about, on the day of his circumcision, "What's he going to be? John? Oh, he should be called Zechariah." They have this discussion. Dad says, "Give me a writing tablet." He writes on it: "John." His name is John. And it says in verse 65: "Fear came on all their neighbors." All these things were talked about through the whole country of Judea, because he began to speak—his muteness was gone. And it says, "All who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What then will this child be?'"—John. "What's he going to be?" Now, the answer, right—we find out in Luke 3. But here's the means: "For the hand of the Lord was with him." Who chose to put the hand of the Lord on this kid? God did. Whose choice was that? God's. How could the guy have the ministry he had? God chose that.

Well, that's tough. But it's also freeing, in a sense, because I recognize this: that when it comes to what God does in my life, through my life, in the lives of my kids, or through the lives of my kids, ultimately this is part of God's plan. He does, in no way in the Bible, relinquish us from responsibility. If you need some help with that, go to Acts 2 and read Peter's sermon. Peter's sermon says this: the people that killed Christ are responsible, and they need to repent. And Peter is saying, "You handed him up by the hands of lawless men; he was crucified." You need to repent of that. But then he describes it—he sets up the scene this way: "He was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." What's the point? God had a plan; he worked it out. He knew exactly how this was going to go. He had planned it ahead of time. It's called the sovereignty of God. And yet you're still culpable for your decisions.

We call that in theology an antinomy, and it's one of the reasons I put on the back of the worksheet some books on that tension between God's sovereignty and free will. And I've got to tell you, Carson's book is a little tough—it's near the top because it's all in alphabetical order. You want some easy readers on that? Go to the bottom of the list. You can look at—maybe helpful in this is J. I. Packer's book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*—if you haven't read that, that's one every Christian should read. Or Wilson's book—Doug Wilson's *Easy Chairs, Hard Words*—that's probably the most readable, but really tight when it comes to the argument of just saying, "Listen, God is sovereign; he is free in his choices, and ultimately our decisions are contingent on his decisions." Therefore, when something good takes place, if you're Zechariah and Elizabeth raising this kid, you look at God and say, "God is fulfilling his plan through my kid's life. God is fulfilling his plan through my life."

Just one verse on this—it'd be worth turning to. Could you go to 1 Corinthians chapter 4? Look through the first five verses here—you see this debate going on: Apollos, Paul, Cephas (Peter, that



is)—all these people rally around: “This is the greatest.” “No, he’s the greatest.” “I’m the greatest.” “He’s the greatest.” All that nonsense. And he talks about how it really is about God—God who causes the growth—let’s give God the credit. God is the sovereign one overseeing all this.

He said, “I’ve applied all these things to myself and to Apollos for your benefit”—this is verse 6, 1 Corinthians 4:6—“that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.” Verse 7—key passage; ought to be highlighted in your Bible: “For who sees anything different in you?” You make distinctions—“That one’s greater.” “No, that one’s greater.” “Look at these things that guy did—that was greater.” “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” Anything that God does for the kingdom of heaven through our lives—you’ve got to look back at God and say, “In your sovereign, generous, merciful plan, you’ve provided this in me; you’ve worked it through me. I’ve worked hard, I’ve prayed, I’ve knocked, I’ve sought, I strove—I did all of that. But it doesn’t matter. Ultimately it is not about him who runs or him who exerts his power,” according to Romans 9; “it’s about the one who wills it to be.”

In that regard, it’s an antinomy—that word, if you don’t know it—this sense of two conflicting, paradoxical truths that are laid side by side in the Bible but are true. Right? It’s like the Trinity—the three-in-one thing. Math majors, that doesn’t work, right? There’s something wrong with that—and yet this is the mystery of the depth of God’s character and his ontological existence. And so it is with this matter: are you free to make decisions? You’ll make decisions today—I get that. But when God works through our decision-making process and does something for the kingdom of heaven through you or your kids, the Bible says, “Acknowledge his sovereignty.” God is the God that from the beginning mapped this out.

It’s a bit of a schizophrenic sermon, I understand—abortion, parenting, strength, sovereignty. But I think part of what we bring from this—certainly as we end on the concept of sovereignty—is God’s oversight and superintendence of all things.

Our sin is egregious—whether it’s abortion, or gossip, or hatred, or bitterness, or lust, adultery—whatever your sin is, it’s egregious to a holy God. It would be good for us to end this message with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which reminds us that the whole point of the gospel is that no matter what your sin is, the grace of God had to provide payment for that sin. The justice of God had to be paid.

So the ushers are going to come down right now as we wrap up this message. We’re going to pass out the elements of the Lord’s Supper. And as we do, I want you to think about that—as we ought to—and that is, that our sin, as Jesus said, it may be on a different place on the spectrum, but even he said, “If you have bitterness in your heart, it’s like you’re a murderer.” No matter what your sin,



we need the cross. We need Christ to pay the penalty for us so that we don't have to have the condemnation of God. And the good news is—I don't care if you had ten abortions; I don't care if you killed twenty people; I don't care what your situation is—the Bible says with real contrition—what happens? The Bible says all of that is nailed to the cross. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ.”

So I plead with you—if you're not a Christian, you need to consider this. This transaction is available for us to hold on to by faith. So this is a time for us as Christians—if you're not a Christian, you don't know what this is all about, just let the plate go by. But if you're a Christian, hang on to these elements for about three minutes, and then we'll partake of them together. Jeff and them are going to play a little bit in the background here just to set some tone for you to pray silently to God. You make sure your account is confessed up with him. You think about the greatness of his mercy, the generosity of his sovereign oversight of your life—maybe not a bad time to think about your need to be strong and to bear the reproaches. We read in our Daily Bible Reading this morning—if you haven't read it yet, you'll read it this afternoon or tonight—Hebrews 13: to go outside the camp, to bear the reproach—to be strong enough to have the reproach of Christ on us. Spend some time thinking about all that Christ did for us. In about three minutes, I'll come back up and we will partake of these elements at the same time.

We're really blessed to be New Testament Christians looking back at the payment of Christ. Old Testament—they looked forward. They weren't clear. We had animals that were symbolic, and the picture of how Christ was going to take our sin out of the way—it was a bit fuzzy from Old Testament prophecy. And yet the promise was there, and it has been there. I've been reading in our Old Testament reading through Ezekiel, and there's so much there in those Major Prophets about the fall of the southern kingdom of Israel and so much concern about their sin. And even in today's reading—that sense of the opportunity for repentance: “If you repent, God will give you grace and mercy.”

I think of the most classic lines in that regard in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 18, where it says, “Though your sins are like scarlet”—well, it starts with this line—“Come, let us reason together.” Come on, think about this. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” And then it says, man, if you just obey, you'll eat the fruit of the land.

Now that picture of repentance, right—that means I see sin for what it is, and I turn, and I go, “God, I want to obey you. I want to serve you. I recognize my need, my problem, and I trust you to solve it.” I mean, from a New Testament perspective, you can't say that—you can't even get that transaction out on a piece of paper—without mentioning Jesus Christ, because he's the reason that our sins go from scarlet to white, from crimson to wool. And the good news as we think about these elements is that Christ said, as your church—as the people, the disciples of Christ—follow this



pattern of taking this bread and drinking this cup, this picture of the body and blood of Christ—you'll never forget the payment and the reason for it.

So I trust that we recognize our forgiveness is not by divine fiat. It's not just something, you know, out of the air where somebody just says, "Oh, that's okay, let it go." This is a righteous Judge who needs payment for sin, and he was willing to provide that payment himself in the person of his Son. So, with gratitude, I hope, and recognizing that our sins can be white as snow—cleansed—that our hope for relationship with God can be built on what he did, not on what we can do—not even our reform, or our tears, or contrition, or any kind of penance, or anything we can do—that it's all because of the finished work of Christ. It can give us great confidence.

And with that in mind, I trust as you think through the sin-debt in your own life—as we confess our sins to God—we can be confident: he's faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And for that we should joyfully eat this bread and drink this cup.

Pray with me.

God, any real regenerate heart in the room doesn't have to see some sin like abortion or murder to feel that grip of hopelessness—that we cannot live up to your standard, that we have fallen short. And God, as we think of that, and I hope even as we relive that as we think through the Lord's Supper, we don't stay there because we recognize it: the whole point of the broken body and the shed blood of Christ was that we have our sins paid, forgiven—that there's no condemnation for us. How joyful it is to look at our own sin and the ways that we fail and the ways that we transgress your law and to know that because of what Christ has done, out of great love for us, we're forgiven.

So God, we celebrate that now with one last song. We recognize the great privilege we have as forgiven, adopted children of the King. Thanks, God, that all of our past has been nailed to the cross—its shame and its sin we bear no more. Thank you for that, God. We love you very much for that central transaction of the Christian life. In Jesus' name, Amen.