

A Declaration of Those Things Which Are Most Surely Believed Among Us

An Expository Study of **The Gospel According to Luke**

Chapter 1- Luke 1:15-17

6 The Greatest Man Born of Woman- Part 1

November 23, 2008

Luke 1:15-17

Now this is the sixth sermon in our verse by verse journey through **The Gospel According to Luke**. And so far- we have been going through the narrative Part of **Luke** in Chapter 1. And we've gone all the way down to verse 25.

Now so far- center stage in this Story of Salvation has been an old couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth. He is a humble priest and they are faithful to the Lord- righteous and blameless in the commandments and requirements of the Lord. And last time we saw how that he went down to do his priestly duty in the Temple in Jerusalem which he did two weeks a year. And this time- his lot was chosen and he was able to go inside the holy place and offer the incense on the altar of incense which was a high privilege for any priest. Very few of the 18,000 priests would have the privilege of doing that in their entire lifetime.

And in verse 11- while he was in there- an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him and made a very startling announcement. The angel said that Zacharias was going to have a son- let's read verses 13 & 14 again together:

Luke 1:13

13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.

14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

Now we saw last time that what was remarkable about this was that an angel hadn't visited anyone for over 400 years- God had not

spoken to Man for over 400 years. There hadn't been a single prophet giving the Word of the Lord for over 400 years. There hadn't been a single miracle in over 500 years and there hadn't been a season of miracles in over 800 years.

And now all of a sudden an angel appears and brings a message from God about a miracle which is really only the beginning of many, many miracles that are to suddenly burst on the scene.

So this event with Zacharias and this angel is the launching pad of the entire New Testament. All of this is signaling that the Messiah- the long-awaited, long hoped for Messiah- is soon to come.

And when we last left our hero- Zacharias was standing there in fear and trembling before an angel of the Lord. And the fact that Zacharias did indeed fear the Lord shows us the condition of his heart.

As I told you last time- we are in great need in our day of a revival of the Fear of the Lord. We live in a day of great presumption where people really believe that they have a right to live their lives according to the dictates of their own heart and not according to God's Word. This lawlessness is the result of there being no fear in the Church.

The Fear of the Lord, in addition to being the beginning of both Wisdom and Knowledge, also speaks volumes about the Respect and Honor and Dignity that God deserves and that He is entitled to and that for the most part He does not receive from the average person today.

We have come to think in our day that worship is something that we give to God during the song service to prove how good we are, that this speaks of our integrity- that we are noble, or that we are to be looked at with esteem because we worship God. But in reality- we should worship God because we have judged God to be entitled to our worship, that He deserves to be worshiped, and we, therefore, worship God because we have developed a Biblical understanding of Who God is along with a Biblical understanding of who we are, and our only reasonable response to all that God is and all that God has done is to worship Him.

In fact- this goes so far as to be unreasonable, and, therefore, sin for us *not* to worship God. And so we rightly fear God, we respect God, and we speak about God with wonder, in amazement, with a sense of honor and dignity and awe that is only rightfully reserved for God. And fear and worship spills over so that we live our lives in such a way that

reflects that respect and that honor by doing those things that are pleasing in His sight and shunning those things that dishonor our great God.

You see, dear friends, it is not enough to say that you worship God because you love Him. Love is great and I am all about Love- but we really cannot love a supernatural God unless we have this reverential awe and hushed respect of Him. And I say to you very clearly that if you do not fear God- you do not love Him- because without godly fear- you really don't know Who God is and it is impossible to really love someone you do not know.

So, by default, then, any discussion of worship and love must include godly, reverential fear because without true Biblical fear- we will, by default- cheapen God, and we will not worship God correctly.

And as I told you last time- Luke speaks much about this reverential fear throughout this Gospel Account, and so we also should speak often about the fear of the Lord ourselves.

Think about how long it has been since you or anyone you know even prayed about the Fear of the Lord. Think how long it has been since you heard a song- even in Church- that elicited godly fear in your heart. When was it that you last discussed godly fear with anyone? How does the fear of the Lord measure your daily steps? And if you answer those questions truthfully- you will agree with me that we are in desperate need today for a revival of the Fear of the Lord.

So Zacharias is standing there and an angel suddenly appears and tells him that the long standing prayer that he and Elizabeth have prayed for many decades is now going to be answered and they will now- miraculously- have a son.

Now both Zacharias and Elizabeth had been so deeply burdened by this barrenness- their childlessness, and they had continually asked God to give them a son. Why? Because Zacharias wanted to pass on the priesthood to a son. And so here comes this angel- suddenly- after they had both passed the time when child bearing was possible- and the angel comes with this very understated statement.

And isn't it remarkable that this announcement from Heaven was without any fanfare or hype? Isn't it amazing that God is the God of small beginnings? God is the God of understatement? One man- Zacharias- who can best be described by Luke using the adjective

"certain"- not a notable man at all- just a plain old every day average guy- and here an angel stands before him.

And it's incredible what God has done and does through this one small beginning. And it all starts when God answers the prayer of a little insignificant couple for a child. And by God graciously answering that specific prayer for this insignificant couple- God Providentially answers the greatest longings of the entire believing world. Through answering the long standing prayer of this insignificant couple for a child- God begins the fulfillment of over 400 Old Testament Prophecies concerning the birth and ministry and life and death and Resurrection and Second coming of the Messiah- Jesus Christ. This one answer launches it all. So never underestimate what God has intended through small beginnings, through you.

But also notice another thing that happens along with this marvelous event. Please notice that as the angel begins to tell Zacharias all that his son will be and what his son will do- the angel also gives him some information that perhaps neither Zacharias nor Elizabeth were wanting or even appreciated. Look at the last part of verse 13:

... and you will give him the name John.

Now right about now- as Zacharias hears these words- fear must have turned into shock- not the shock of terror- but the shock of disbelief. What? John? Why not Zacharias, Jr.? John? Why John? Who set that up? Now I'm not going to get into this- this morning- but I would like for someone to try to reconcile the fact that God- through this angel- is imposing on Zacharias what he is going to name his son with the notion that God will never violate the free will of Man and see how far you can go with it.

Now just what does that name "John" mean? It means "God is gracious." It is from two words- "God" and "favor" to get "God is gracious". And the angel- by imposing that name on Zacharias- is saying that God is about to explode upon the sinful world through His Grace. And that is why this name is imposed on Zacharias and not something that God allowed either Zacharias or Elizabeth to come up with.

And what is amazing here is that the small part that God imposed on them is the part that generates the greatest amount of controversy. Look down to verse 57- **Luke 1:57**- and even though we'll get this to later- I'll give you a little preview now.

Luke 1:57-66

57 Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son.

58 Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her.

59 And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father.

60 But his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John."

61 And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name."

62 And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called.

63 And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all astonished.

64 And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he *began* to speak in praise of God.

65 Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea.

66 All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, "What then will this child *turn out to be*?" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.

Now how would you like to be 80 years old and for the first time father a child and be deaf and dumb so you can't tell anybody about it? Well that's exactly what happened to Zacharias. And while God will never make you do anything- but He has a marvelous way of making you willing to do what is His Will- both Zacharias and Elizabeth ended up being willing to name the baby exactly what the angel said to name him- John- even though nobody in Zacharias's family was named John.

And this isn't something to be sad over- remember what the angel said- but this is something to be glad over. Even though it starts out pretty rough- the angel said that there's going to be joy at this child's birth. There's going to be joy not only on Zacharias' part- but there's

going to be joy on the part of a lot of people. You're going to have joy- you're going to have gladness to be sure because your long standing prayer is answered- but also many are going to rejoice at this birth.

But why are they going to rejoice at the birth of John? Because he's going to be the one, verse 15, who will be great in the sight of the Lord, and drink no wine or liquor, and be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. He will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. That's why they're going to rejoice because John's going to have an evangelistic ministry and he's going to turn many people back to God.

So when Elizabeth had the child, over in verse 58, the neighbors and friends- everybody rejoiced. But when John grew up and preached- a whole nation rejoiced. And when the Messiah whom he announced came- the whole world rejoiced. So don't you see that God is the God of small beginnings? Don't be afraid. This child will bring you joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth.

So the Story of Salvation is launched. God sends an angel. God speaks through that angel His message and God promises a miracle birth to this couple. And with that Divine Intervention, that Divine Imposition- the Story of Salvation begins.

So the Story of Salvation begins with this insignificant couple who prayed for years that they would have a son and the miraculous answering of their prayer- even in a time when it was impossible for that prayer to be answered- actually fulfilled the greater Will of God in raising up a forerunner of the Messiah.

So now the focus of Luke's Account will gradually shift away from Zacharias and Elizabeth and will focus on John. So just who was John? And the answer to that question is the subject of today's message. So let's read **Luke 1:15-17** again together:

15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God.

17 It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

That is the astonishing message that came directly from an angel to Zacharias. And it starts out in verse 15 with the word

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord ...

History in the past has certainly been able to chronicle truly great people. Although it is much harder today to sort out the truly great people from those who are merely famous for being famous- nothing more than being creations of the media.

Sports figures and music personalities are called "great", yet they are more examples of egotism than they are true greatness. In fact- if you look at the issue of greatness and the popular perspective on it- the term "greatness" is associated today with things like fame, money, popularity, the amount of attention that the media places on an individual, press releases, societal admiration, and celebrity. That's one form of greatness.

Another form of greatness looks strictly at someone's significant achievement- something beyond entertaining people. And this measurement of greatness says that the truly great are those who significantly impact the world. They impact people in a lasting way; they impact people forever; they impact the world with some improvement on life.

But whether we look at greatness from the standpoint of celebrity, or whether we look at greatness from the standpoint of human achievement- in either case- it falls way short of God's perspective of what greatness is.

God's label of greatness is reserved for something that transcends all other perspectives on the human level of greatness. And God's view of greatness is to look at who God Himself labels as great. And here we meet such a person. God said John was great.

So now notice here in **Luke 1:15** that it isn't Zacharias who says that John will be great- this is not the pride of a proud poppa bragging on his only son- but it is God Himself- speaking through the angel- Who says that John will be great. This is God Almighty placing greatness on an individual.

And yet none of the normal trappings associated with greatness in human society are a part of John's life. He had no royal birth- to put it mildly. He was born to a very, very old, and very, very plain and

common couple. John had no prominence by virtue of his personal heritage. He was no intellectual as far as we know. We don't know anything about his intellectual capabilities. He's not at all assigned any responsibility in terms of inventing anything, in terms of ideologies, or ideas or business. He came from a common, simple, undistinguished family living in a small village somewhere, according to verse 39, in the Judean hillsides, some non-descript place.

John had no formal education. He lived in relative isolation. Down in verse 80 of this chapter it says that while he grew and developed strong in spirit- John lived the majority of his life in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel. So he grew up in isolation. He grew up away from the social centers, away from interaction with society in general.

And John was not political. John was not part of those who had resigned themselves to living in slavery under the Romans- nor was he a part of those zealots who sought to overthrow the Roman authorities through acts of terrorism. He was apolitical- non-political.

And John certainly was not fashion conscious. According to **Matthew 3 & 4**- John wore a very plain garment of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist. That was his daily, every day wardrobe.

And we also know from Scripture that unlike many of his day and ours- John wasn't much into a healthy diet as a means to obtain godliness. John ate locusts- no doubt dried out and perhaps cooked, and crunched them down and covered them with wild honey. Not somebody you would invite over for Christmas dinner.

And John had no involvement in any formal institution. He wasn't associated with the priesthood- even though he came from a priestly line. He wasn't associated with royalty at all. He wasn't associated with any of the official institutions of his day. He founded no institutions. He started no real movements. He was responsible for no organization- no new inventions or business. In fact, the people in authority- both in and out of the Church at the time- resented him. They resented him fiercely. And he resented them, too, and described them as a bunch of snakes- so we can also see that John really wasn't big on diplomacy and winning friends.

The ruler at the time- a man by the name of Herod in the Herodian line- whom the Romans did regard as being great- imprisoned John. He was held in prison until Herod was moved by lustful

excitement one night as he watched a young girl dancing. And in the midst of his excitement- Herod wanted to give her anything and she asked for the head of John on a platter. So John was despised by many- even women.

In his lustful excitement- the foolish king did what she asked and had John that night decapitated and served his head on a plate to the party. So we can see that even though God said that John was great- he was treated with terrible disrespect and disdain by people. He was little more than a man to be decapitated for the pleasure of a girl who had excited a Roman ruler through lust- certainly not someone whom the world would call "great".

Even John's ministry was brief- his fifteen minutes of fame- was very short. His appearance on the world's stage didn't last very long at all. He did not live a long life. And we will see how that John himself tried to bring his own fame to a rapid end. John's star faded fast- intentionally.

So there really isn't anything in John's life that we can see that would be associated with anything we might call "greatness". And that's why it says in verse 15, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Because he was not great in the sight of Man- even though he did garner a small following who understood that he was a true prophet of God and who believed in him and who were loyal to his message. And they were so loyal to him that John himself had to push them away from himself and towards Christ- which didn't do anything but increase the speed with which his own star faded from the sky.

But as far as the general assessment of the world is concerned- John doesn't find his way into their categories of greatness. But in God's Eyes- John was great. The English word "great" is from the Greek word *me^gas*, from which we get "*mega*". So John was a "mega star" as far as God was concerned. And by the way, that same term is used of Jesus in verse 32 where the angel who announces the birth of Jesus in verse 26 to Mary says of Jesus, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." Notice it doesn't say "in the sight of God" about Jesus, because unlike John- Jesus was great not just by an individual's perspective, not even just by God's Perspective- but Jesus was "great"; Jesus was mega- in the absolute sense of "greatness" because Jesus was God in human flesh.

So the question is asked then, "How great was John?" because great is a relative term. It's a relative term even in the way we use it. We say someone is great but that's relative to some environment which we have in mind. There are all kinds of greatness. So what is John's level of greatness?

And the answer comes later in chapter 7. And we'll look at this, of course, in detail when we get there- in a few years. But **Luke 7:28** says,

I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

And **Matthew 11:11** records the same truth but Matthew has a few different words. **Matthew 11:11** records Jesus saying,

Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

So Matthew says that Jesus said that not only is John the greatest prophet who ever lived- but that he is the greatest man beside Jesus Himself who has ever lived. And that's an amazing commendation.

Now the term "born of women" that Jesus used here was a common expression during Bible times that referred to humanness. And so Jesus is saying that, "No greater human being has ever lived." So Matthew was in this sense saying that John was greater than Enoch who walked with God and he was not for God took him, Greater than Noah who was spared the Flood, Greater than Abraham, the father of Israel, the friend of God, Greater than Isaac, greater than Jacob, and greater than Joseph.

Could this mean that John was greater than Moses, the great lawgiver? Could it mean that John was greater than Samuel, greater than Samson, greater than Gideon, and greater than David? Could it be that Jesus was saying that John was greater than Elijah who was taken into Heaven by a chariot? Was John greater than Elisha the great prophet, greater than Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel and all the other prophets?

Yes, that is exactly what it means. It also means that John was greater than all of those heroes of faith listed in **Hebrews 11**. This is the greatest person who ever lived up to that time under the Old Covenant-

the greatest of all people in the time of Promise, the greatest in terms of what he was called and chosen to do and what he was called and chosen to be. John is the greatest.

And his greatness is not measured by any of the normal ways in which the world measures greatness. None of them. In fact, from the world's perspective- John really didn't achieved anything of lasting value. He was, in fact, hated, despised, and finally decapitated.

But he was great, according to verse 15, not in the sight of men particularly, but in the sight of the Lord. Now let me just tell you about that phrase. "In the sight of the Lord" or "In the sight of God" is a phrase used many times in Scripture. It is used many times by Luke. He uses it several times in this Gospel, including back in verse 6 referring to the fact that Zacharias and Elizabeth were righteous "in the sight of God". But he also uses it in numerable times in **The Book of the Acts**. So Luke uses the phrase "In the sight of God," or "In the sight of the Lord" both in his Gospel Account and in **The Book of the Acts**.

And Paul used this term. Paul used it many times. I could probably count up nearly ten times that Paul used this phrase. He used it in **2 Corinthians** maybe five times or so. He used it in writing to Timothy in a couple of places. Peter uses it- **1Peter 3:4**. James uses it, **James 4:10**.

So it was a common expression. And what it simply means is Divine Approval, or Divine Favor. John will be great as far as God is concerned. John will have Divine Approval. That's the general sense of the term. He will be great as far as bearing God's Approval is concerned. John may never gain the approval of Man- but he will have the Approval of God.

But inherent in that term is a very specific reality that you need to understand, and that is this, no one is ever approved by God whose sin has not been covered. Do you understand that? So inherent in the generic statement "approved by God" is that this man will be a justified man. He will be *made* righteous. He will be a saved man. He will be a man to whom the Lord imputes righteousness. He will be a man covered by the righteousness of God. So you have to look at Divine Approval- not in terms that the person does something that God likes or approves of- but rather in the sense that God has made the person right with Him.

We sink back down into a works based Salvation every single time we think or say or believe that someone is approved by God based on what they did. No, no, no, no. Never are we approved by God by what we do. We are approved by God only because God has Sovereignly made us approved in his sight. But you say, *"Brother Blair- John did godly things."* Yes, he did. *"Well, if he did godly things- then that is what must have made him approved by God."* Wrong. Dead wrong.

This is where people get off base real quick. They see a verse that says that someone did something godly and they conclude that it was their doing of that godly thing that made them godly. No. That is never the case. Our approval by God is always the result of what God did for us by Grace- when we are completely unworthy.

Now it is true that people who have been made righteous by Grace through Faith do godly things- but in response to what God has already done for them by Grace. Sinful, lost, unredeemed human beings do not and cannot do godly things to earn godliness- but people who have already been made righteous do godly things out of a loving response to what God has already done for them- not because what they do earns them righteousness.

And that's the idea in **Romans 2:13-**

For *it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.*

Now this verse *looks* like it says that those who do righteous things are rewarded with justification- but actually- just the opposite.

This verse actually says that God gives a person the covering of righteousness by Grace through Faith which results in the desire and the power to obey His holy Law. So while Salvation is wholly a Sovereign Work of Grace- it is measured by the resulting obedience to God's Law. And that is what Conversion is all about- that is Salvation- that's Justification, and with that Sovereign Work of Grace comes Sanctification- which is the day by day struggle to obey God's moral and eternal Law.

So verse 15 is a Divine Promise. This is a Prophecy; this is a Pledge from God through the mouth of a holy angel that John will be a justified man. This is a Promise of the Salvation of someone not yet conceived and is a very monumental point in understanding **The**

Doctrine of Sovereign Unconditional Election- which is one of the most hated Truths in the entire Bible. God chose John and said that he will be great- or in other words- that he will be saved- before John was ever born.

God has chosen John for Justification, for Salvation before he was ever conceived- in fact- the Bible says in **Ephesians** that God chose him before God made the world. That is an illustration of how God has chosen all who believe and written their names in the Lamb's Book of Life before the foundation of the world. God was pleased with His Son because He was sinless, and God is pleased with anyone who is covered with the righteousness of His Son. And God is pledging that in behalf of John.

So the angel is telling Zacharias that John has God's approval on his life- before he is ever born. He will be right in the sight of God. And he will be more than that- he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be justified- and that's reserved for those whose sins are forgiven and are covered by the righteousness of God. He will thereby be favorable to God as his parents were by their own faith, as verse 6 indicates. So John's greatness is a greatness that's unequalled by any human up to his time- the greatest who ever lived. And that greatness must by necessity include Justification.

So I want to begin this morning- and Lord willing finish next week- to discuss the three demonstrations of John's greatness that flows from this text. The three demonstrations of John's greatness- and this is powerful- so hang on!

1. John's greatness evidences itself in his personal character. Look again at **Luke 1:15**:

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

So by the angel associating being filled with the Spirit along with not drinking wine or strong drink- we can see that one has to do with the physical- while the other has to do with the spiritual. One has to do with the *external* life that John lives- he will not drink wine or liquor-

and the other has to do with the *internal* and spiritual- he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

So the angel identifies something about John's personal character on the outside and on the inside. First of all, he will drink no wine or liquor. Liquor is often translated in the New Testament and the Old as strong drink. And this demonstrates a temperate life style, a moderate life style, a life style of self-denial.

So a person who wore camel's hair, a leather belt, and ate locusts and wild honey, had already demonstrated great temperance and a somewhat indifferent attitude toward the pleasures of the world- the dietary pleasures and the wardrobe fashion pleasures of the world. So from this we can see that John had eschewed or disdained those things.

And now this statement by the angel takes us even further. John will not drink wine or liquor as a lifelong commitment. Now I have to talk about this for a brief moment so that you understand what this is saying. Certainly it's saying he's going to be temperate- that he is going to be a man of tremendous self control. Certainly it's saying he's going to disdain some of the simple pleasures of life, some of the comforts of life- John is going to distance himself from those things. He is going to be so preoccupied with the Work of God that he has been commissioned to do- that he does not have the time or the inclination to worry about these things.

But let's talk specifically about what might be behind this. The angel said that John will drink no wine or liquor. So let me talk about wine for a moment. There were two Hebrew words which Luke would have known very well for wine. One of them is *tirosh*. That's a Hebrew word that means: *new wine; fresh wine; or plain unfermented grape juice*. *Tirosh* is plain "grape juice"- even though the English translation says "wine", and this word is associated with blessing in the Old Testament. You see the word *tirosh* in **Deuteronomy 7, Deuteronomy 11** and **2Kings 18**, and other places- and it's simply grape juice. *Tirosh* was enjoyed freely by God's people and it is associated with the way God blesses. God provides the vineyards and He provides grapes and He provides the fresh sweet new grape juice or "new wine" for us to enjoy. That's *tirosh*.

But then there's another Hebrew word, *yayin*- a much more familiar word in the Old Testament. *Yayin* *always* refers to fermented grape juice or that grape juice that has become alcoholic due to the

fermenting process. You see, there was no refrigeration during the first century and Israel has a very warm climate and the summers are very, very hot without refrigeration. So obviously everything would ferment and so the Old Testament had a word specifically for fermented grape juice- the word, yayin- which is also translated into English as the word "wine". And yayin is used many places in the Old Testament.

So the rabbis were concerned about the intoxicating capabilities of yayin- and so they required that this fermented grape juice be mixed with water- up to a ratio of 8 to 1- eight parts water with 1 part fermented grape juice. And by this dilution- intoxication- which is always in all cases a sin- would be prevented.

Also the fermented "wine", the yayin, would act as a disinfectant on the water which was otherwise not free from amoeba and bacteria and whatever. So the rabbis always called for a mixture. So they would either drink plain grape juice, called tirosh, or they would drink this mixture of water and fermented grape juice, called yayin- both of them translated into English as "wine".

And the Old Testament acknowledges the common consumption of those beverages, both plain and fermented. And it calls for moderation in drinking both. And the Bible clearly rejects drunkenness in any form and it also rejects a love for drinking in any form. So beer and modern wine and especially hard liquor is certainly never to be placed in the mouth of a believer.

And this is all over the Old Testament. For example- in **Proverbs 20:1**- you have a general statement that says,

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.

Here, "wine" is yayin- fermented grape juice or grape juice that has become alcoholic, and the term "strong drink" here means hard liquor. So Solomon is issuing another inspired caution to God's people about the sin of drinking alcohol. And certainly the stories are endless of how alcohol has ruined the lives of millions of people. So we can see that fermented grape juice or alcoholic beverages have the potential to mock you, to turn you into a fool, as it were- unless they are diluted with water to the ratio of 8 to 1, and strong drink or hard liquor is strictly prohibited under any circumstances because it will make you

into a brawler and all people who are intoxicated are just not using their God given minds. **Proverbs 21:17** says,

He who loves pleasure *will become* a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich.

Why? Because you spend all your time drinking- you love to drink and you don't work and you become a drinker- and drinking robs you and your family of the necessary funds to live. **Proverbs 23:20** gives an even further warning,

Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, *Or* with gluttonous eaters of meat;

Which, of course, condemns riotous parties that include lots of eating along with drinking alcohol- which, of course, condemns all most all parties given by the people of the world. A believer should not attend those parties unless he is there to preach the Gospel.

You know, probably one of the greatest mysteries of all times is that after over 6,000 years of alcohol ruining the lives of countless millions of people- it is more popular than ever- a tribute to fallen man's inability to learn anything from history.

And, of course, there are endless judgments pronounced on drunkards that I won't take the time to go through. But read the prophet Amos- a brief little book- I think only nine chapters- and the prophet Amos says there are certain judgments coming on God's people because of sins associated with drunkenness with wine. Later in that prophecy, however, to show you God's View, in **Amos 9:13** God says:

13 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “When the plowman will overtake the reaper And the treader of grapes him who sows seed; When the mountains will drip sweet wine And all the hills will be dissolved.

14 “Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live *in them*; They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, And make gardens and eat their fruit.

15 “I will also plant them on their land, And they will not again be rooted out from their land Which I have given them,” Says the LORD your God.

So here is the scoop about alcohol. God provided grape juice, called “wine”, as a beverage to be enjoyed in moderation with

thanksgiving to the God who gave it. And the rabbis were wise to say that we should mix the grape juice that has become fermented- either on purpose to kill the bacteria or by accident due to the heat and now contains alcohol with water to a ratio of 8 to 1 so that you protect yourself against the sin of drunkenness. And the Bible warns us about loving drinking and it identifies drunkenness as a serious iniquity.

And when you come in to the New Testament there's a common New Testament word for "wine", it's the Greek word *oinos*, and it basically means the same thing. In the New Testament- wine is certainly there. And it is to be dealt with in moderation. A believer is not to linger long beside his wine- that is- he is not to love drinking and drunkenness is always identified as a serious sin.

Now we know that wine was used in that society, for example- in **John 2** at a wedding. Jesus went to the wedding. When they ran out, Jesus created wine. He created wine bypassing the earth, bypassing the vineyard, bypassing the vine, bypassing the grape, and bypassing the grape vat. He just created plain grape juice- called "wine" out of water, and you can be sure that because Jesus did it- it was wine that bypassed the curse, and, therefore, it was unfermented grape juice- no alcoholic grape juice- called "new wine".

But we must acknowledge that even fermented grape juice- that grape juice that had alcohol in it had a role to play in the New Testament- one place only- as a medicine for stomach ailments- never to drink socially. It is found when the Apostle Paul said to Timothy, **1Timothy 5:23**,

No longer drink water *exclusively*, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

Again this was because the water there as filled with bacteria and amoebas and was not clean. So that is the single New Testament liberty for any believer to ever drink fermented or alcoholic grape juice- always mixed with water in at least 8 to 1 ratio, and always used only as a medicine to help relieve stomach ailments. Never used to celebrate; never used at parties or feasts- that kind of wine is simply grape juice- never fermented grape juice.

And we must remember that in every case- drunkenness is always condemned as a horrible sin- even in the New Testament, and I think you can infer with that – that getting what they call a “buzz” is also sin.

And when we read **Ephesians 5:18** it tells us clearly:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,

So wine is dealt with in those terms. It's there in the Bible- but with this understanding. What is called “new wine” is unfermented non-alcoholic grape juice, or simply grape juice, and was blessed by God to be enjoyed by God's people in moderation. That grape juice that has become fermented either on purpose or accidentally and is now alcoholic was always wisely mixed with water up to a ratio of 8 to 1 so that it purged the water and diluted the intoxicating capability. Under the Old Covenant- it was enjoyed in moderation- under the New Covenant- it is to be used only for medicinal purposes.

But even then- with mixed fermented grape juice- you are cautioned to never love drinking and never to become drunk. And please keep in mind that wine, as we know it today, is not at all like the wine in the Bible because our wine is not mixed.

Now what is called “strong drink” or liquor in our day- you have a different issue. The Greek word for “strong drink” is sikera. In Hebrew it's shekar. Strong drink means an intoxicating beverage. It comes from a verb meaning “to be drunk.” This is a beverage designed for one purpose and that is to help you lose your self-control, undiluted fermented beverages from fruit or grain, such as whiskeys and beers, consumed for the purpose of intoxication because they wanted to get drunk. They wanted the feeling and the pleasure of drunkenness.

But even at that- strong drink did have an anesthetic use. For example- **Deuteronomy 14:26** introduces strong drink as a feature of life that God has provided. And **Proverbs 31:6** tells us who is to use it- it is only for those people who are at some point of serious life threatening suffering,

Give strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to him whose life is bitter.

The logic there is that people suffering with life threatening diseases such as cancer and the like can perhaps be alleviated to some degree with the use of strong drink- similarly the way that doctors and hospitals use morphine today. But Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments clearly warns us against any other use for strong drink.

So could we say, *"Well, John didn't drink wine or strong drink cause he was just going to take the high ground and be a model of godly virtue. He was going to the top level. He wasn't going to tamper with anything that might corrupt him. He stayed away from the world's wardrobe; He stayed away from the world's diet; He stayed away from the world's beverage indulgence; He as free of political influence and this reference is simply another indication of John being sold out to God."*

Yes, that's possible that this reference was just some general affirmation on the angel's part along that line and that was by God's designed.

But there is another component to throw in here. According to **Leviticus 10:9**- when any priest went down to the temple to do his duty- to do his work at the temple- he could not be drunk. In fact, if he happened to be drunk and he was doing his priestly duty- God had said he might die. Listen to what it says in **Leviticus 10:8**:

8 The LORD then spoke to Aaron, saying,

9 "Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations—

10 and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean,

So if you're in drunken condition, doing something that was not appropriate to the ceremonies that were prescribed by God, treating God with such indifference as to be inebriated when you come into His holy presence- that could be deadly for you. And it may well be that some priests took it beyond just rendering their service in the temple and decided the safest thing to do was never to bring such shame and dishonor to God, and so they perhaps would even vow to do that permanently. Certainly John's father- Zacharias would abide by the prescription of **Leviticus 10** whenever he was doing his priestly duty. So priests had some restrictions on drinking as well.

And it also is true, according to **Proverbs 31:4** that rulers and leaders were never to consume those beverages. That verse says:

...It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink,

So anybody who is a leader, anybody who has responsibility, anybody who has to make decisions and set examples, should not be engaging in drinking wine or strong drink. In the New Testament Elders are not to be drinkers. Of course, Elders and Pastors are not to be drunk. And Paul's injunction to Timothy to take a little wine may have been given because Timothy may well have been a tee-totaler and had to be told to drink some wine because he took the high ground and wanted to avoid anything that could ever bring shame or dishonor to God or cloud his judgment.

So you could say...Well, John is not officially a priest though he's in a priestly line. He's certainly not a ruler or a king. But maybe he wanted to take the high ground. Maybe he just wanted to take that kind of level of life that lifts you all the way to the top and abstain from all these beverages as a part of his own personal self-denial. And that is one possibility.

But there's one other possibility. **Numbers 6** introduces a wonderful Old Testament vow into the discussion. It was called a Nazarite vow, not meaning from the city of Nazareth- but an old Hebrew word meaning "separated." A vow of separation...a Jew could decide to say, *"I want to separate to God for a period of time. I want to be totally devoted to God. I want to walk the high road with God, and so I'll take a certain period of days and I will vow this Nazarite vow of separation unto God."*

The first component in it is this is in **Numbers 6:2**:

2 "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When a man or woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to dedicate himself to the LORD,

3 he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, nor shall he drink any grape juice nor eat fresh or dried grapes.

4 All the days of his separation he shall not eat anything that is produced by the grape vine, from *the* seeds even to *the* skin.

5 ‘All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long.

6 ‘All the days of his separation to the LORD he shall not go near to a dead person.

7 He shall not make himself unclean for his father or for his mother, for his brother or for his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head.

8 All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD.

Normally this separation was only for a certain number of days. And the man who vowed this vow would abstain from that which was the normal pleasure of the pleasurable beverage of life. So it was a way to devote himself to God by self-denial. So this was the Nazarite vow, but it incorporated this idea of neither drinking of wine nor liquor.

And some have suggested that John may have been a Nazarite for life. There were only two, according to Scripture. Most people just did that for a few days. There was Samson, according to **Judges 16** and Samuel according to **1Samuel 1**. Very rare someone would do this their whole life. Maybe John was a Nazarite for life- living this separated life- that's possible. We know he separated himself by living in the desert. We know he separated himself in his life style. It may well be that this was indicative of a life of a Nazarite- although the Bible doesn't mention anything about his hair.

But the point is this- John took consecration to the highest level- to the very highest level. Here was a man who on the outside was a consecrated, devoted, separated man. As well as the outside, though, look at the inside, verse 15, and it's the inside that made the outside possible. *"He was filled...will be, it says...filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb."* He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and that infilling will be the pattern of his normal life. He not only will be a man on the outside devoted to God at the highest level of devotion, but on the inside he will be empowered by God at the highest level as well.

And the idea of being filled with the Spirit simply means that he would be under the influencing control and power of the Holy Spirit. His life will be under the Spirit's control. His life will be dominated by the Will of God, the Holy Spirit. The Will of the Spirit, of course, is

mostly expressed in the Word of God. So the phrase- "being filled with the Spirit" simply means that God's Holy Spirit will be in control of his life while he's still in his mother's womb.

So that is point #1 about John's greatness- John had an internal and external quality of godliness about himself. And Lord willing- we will go into the others points next week.

Let's come and pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.