

# Living With Open Hands: What John the Baptist Teaches Us About Surrender

There is a moment in the life of nearly every person who follows Jesus when the question becomes unavoidable: are you actually surrendered, or are you just going through the motions?

It is a harder question than it sounds. Because most of us, if we are honest, have become remarkably skilled at looking surrendered while quietly holding on to everything that matters most to us. We show up. We participate. We check the boxes. But somewhere beneath the surface, our hands are still full, our hearts are still cluttered, and we have not really let go of anything at all.

John the Baptist does not let us stay comfortable in that tension. He never did.

## **The Man in the Wilderness**

Matthew chapter three introduces us to one of the most unusual figures in all of Scripture. John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness of Judea, dressed in camel hair with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. He is not setting up shop in Jerusalem where the crowds already are. He is not building a platform in the most visible place he can find. He is out in the wild, calling people away from their comfort and toward something they have been slowly forgetting.

And the people come. From Jerusalem, from all of Judea, from the whole region of the Jordan -- they come out to hear him. They confess their sins and are baptized in the river.

Matthew is deliberate about every detail he records. Nothing here is accidental. When he identifies John as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy -- the voice calling in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord (Isaiah 40:3 describes a voice in the wilderness making a straight path for God) -- he is making a declaration to his Jewish audience: pay attention. This is the one we have been waiting for. The God who seemed distant has not forgotten his people. He is moving.

## **What the Wilderness Reveals**

The wilderness was not random geography for the people of Israel. It was loaded with meaning. Moses encountered God while shepherding on the backside of the wilderness. David was shaped in the caves before he became king. Elijah retreated there between confrontations with corrupt kings. And the entire nation of Israel spent forty years wandering through it, learning what it meant to depend on God for absolutely everything.

In Deuteronomy 8:2, Moses reminds the people of what that season was really about -- God led them through the wilderness to humble them, to test them, to reveal what was truly in their hearts. They could not control their food supply, their direction, or their water source. Every single day was an exercise in radical dependence.

John is calling the people back to that posture. He is standing on the edge of the wilderness and saying, we have grown comfortable. We have grown religious. We have been doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons, and somewhere along the way we stopped actually following God and started just performing the habits of people who do.

His message -- repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near -- is not gentle. But it is loving. Because John knows what is coming. He knows the kingdom is not just an idea. It is arriving in a person. And you cannot make room for a king in a heart that is already full.

### **When Devotion Rearranges Everything**

The detail about John's clothing is more than a colorful historical footnote. When the religious leaders sent representatives to figure out who this strange man was, they would have recognized something the moment they saw him. In 2 Kings 1:8, a king's messengers describe a man they encountered as wearing a garment of hair with a leather belt -- and the king immediately identifies him as Elijah the Tishbite. John's appearance was a living, breathing visual reference to one of Israel's greatest prophets.

Malachi had promised that Elijah would come before the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5). The angel Gabriel, when announcing John's birth to his father Zechariah, said John would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, turning hearts back to God and making ready a prepared people (Luke 1:16-17). John was not Elijah reincarnated. But he was fulfilling an Elijah-like assignment, and his entire life -- what he wore, where he lived, what he ate -- was an outward expression of total inward surrender.

This is worth sitting with. John did not look radical because he was trying to make a statement. He looked radical because his life had been genuinely rearranged by his devotion to God. Radical surrender does not always look dramatic. It can look like choosing integrity when compromise would be easier. It can look like extending forgiveness before it is deserved. It can look like living generously when every financial instinct says hold on tighter. The posture is what matters. A heart that is truly surrendered will eventually show up in the ordinary choices of an ordinary life.

### **Surrender Is Open Hands**

Here is the image that cuts through everything else: surrender looks like open hands.

There is a difference between thinking you are surrendered and actually being surrendered. A closed fist raised in the air can look like either a declaration of trust or a question about whether trust is even possible. And a lot of people are walking around with their hands half-open, not quite releasing what they are holding, not quite willing to let God have the things that matter most to them -- their finances, their families, their futures, their carefully constructed sense of control.

But the invitation of John's message, and ultimately the invitation of Jesus himself, is not to a God who wants to take things from you. It is to a Father who can be trusted with the things you love most. Surrender is not loss. It is entrusting everything you care about to someone who cares about it more than you do, and who has the power to do something with it that you never could.

John was preparing hearts for the kingdom. The same preparation is required today. If your hands and heart are full, there is no room to receive what God wants to place in them.

The wilderness is still speaking. The question is whether we are willing to listen.

## **Here is a list of all scripture references mentioned in the sermon:**

- Matthew 3:1-6
- Isaiah 40:3
- John 1:22
- Deuteronomy 8:2
- 2 Kings 1:8
- Malachi 4:5
- Luke 1:16-17

**\*\*Alluded To Without Direct Citation\*\***

- Matthew 4:1 (Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness after his baptism)
- Matthew 6:33 (seeking first the kingdom and God providing all things)
- Exodus 16 (manna in the wilderness, Israel's dependence on God for daily food)
- Numbers 9:15-23 (Israel following the cloud of God's presence in the wilderness)
- 1 Samuel 22-24 (David being formed in the caves and wilderness before becoming king)
- Exodus 3:1-4 (Moses encountering God while shepherding on the backside of the wilderness)
- 1 Kings 17-19 (Elijah living in the wilderness and his ministry to the kings of Israel)
- Luke 1:11-20 (Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah about John the Baptist's birth and calling)