

The Gospel of John

Session Two: The Testimony of John the Baptist Commentary

John 1:19-34

1:19–22. Picture the rugged prophet John the Baptist storming up and down the desert, telling people the Messiah is coming. He wore animal skins and ate locusts and wild honey, hardly a refined rabbi with the proper credentials. So formal religious investigation gets under way. The phrase “the Jews” appears nearly seventy times in this Gospel. Sometimes it is used favorably, but more often it expresses hostility. The priests represented the Sanhedrin and the Levites guarded the correctness of temple worship. All the delegates had a simple question for John the Baptist: “Who are you?” Lest anyone confuse the messenger with the Messiah, John quickly told them, I am not the Christ. “Christ” (christos) is simply the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah. Both words mean “anointed.”

Then they give him two other suggestions to deny, Elijah and the Prophet. No portraits of Elijah hung in first-century museums, but John may have reminded his contemporaries of the verbal descriptions in 1 Kings. More than likely, however, this dialogue referred to Malachi 4:5–6: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

The Prophet probably referred to Moses’ promise in Deuteronomy 18:15: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” 1:23. We can hardly imagine the shock the Jerusalem delegation must have felt upon hearing this rugged mountain man quote Isaiah 40:3 to describe himself. Think back to Isaiah’s warnings about the future rise of Babylon with the sharp break in the narrative which begins at chapter 40 to describe the future restoration of Israel. Here is the context for John’s answer:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isa. 40:1–5).

So John was Elijah after all (Matt. 11:14; 17:10–13). He fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi as the forerunner who would proclaim the coming of the king.

1:24–28. Enter the Pharisees, often depicted in the New Testament as the bad guys in the black hats (though there were notable exceptions like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea). They were not satisfied with John’s answers; they wanted a picture I.D.—particularly because John was not just preaching. He was also baptizing people without proper credentials.

John's response rings as one of the great statements of history which our text will amplify in verses 31–34. Water baptism for John's disciples was a ritual act of cleansing demonstrating repentance and anticipation of the Messiah. But already in their very midst he had come. John considered himself unworthy to do the chores of the lowest household slave—loosen Jesus' sandals.

John the Gospel writer was not as concerned with geography as Luke. But he let his readers know where it all began. We should not confuse this Bethany with the hometown of Mary and Martha (11:1) just outside Jerusalem. John designated it as the Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, east of the river.

The answers of John the Baptist offer us three important lessons as Christians: (1) We are not the focus of the witness; (2) we are not the light; and (3) we proclaim belief in Jesus.

1:29. What a revelation and proclamation of the gospel! Imagine the scene as Jesus approached the area of Bethany and John spotted him in the distance. We have come to the second day of John's narrative, and we will see yet one to come in this first chapter. The first biblical mention of the Lamb appears in Genesis 22 when Abraham went to the altar to offer his son Isaac. Leviticus 14 talks about lambs as a guilt offering. John came back to it in Revelation as a triumphal title for the conquering Lord. Tenney says, "It combines in one descriptive term the concepts of innocence, voluntary sacrifice, substitutionary atonement, effective obedience, and redemptive power like that of the Passover Lamb (Exod. 12:21–27)" (Merrill Tenney, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 9, p. 38).

The full expression Lamb of God is found only here and in John 1:36. But the emphasis on substitutionary atonement and the universal offering of salvation and forgiveness of sin form the heart and core of the gospel. As we think about the theme of substitutionary atonement, our minds again rush back to the prophet Isaiah:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:1–5).

1:30–31. John 1:30 is a restatement of John 1:15, emphasizing again John the Baptist's claim of the priority of Christ. John admitted that he did not know his own cousin was the Messiah until Jesus' baptism in the desert.

1:32–34. The baptism of Jesus (see also Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22) took place before this announcement of John 1. The purpose of his baptism, according to Jesus himself, was to fulfill all righteousness—to demonstrate his consecration to the heavenly Father and approval by him. God had obviously given John a direct revelation, telling him that when he saw the dove come down during the baptism he would know the Son of God. Dods treats the union of the Son and Spirit in the charming language of an earlier day:

Why was the Spirit needed in a personality of which the Word, who had been with God and known God, was the basis? Because the humanity of Christ was a true humanity. Being human, he must be indebted to the Spirit for all impartation to His human nature of what is Divine. The knowledge of God which the Word possesses by experience must be humanly apprehended before it can be communicated to men; and this human apprehension can only be arrived at in the case of Christ by the enlightenment of the Spirit ... By the Spirit He was enlightened to speak of things divine; and this Spirit, interposed, as it were, between the Word and the human nature of Jesus, was as little cumbrous in its operation or perceptible in consciousness as our breath interposed between the thinking mind and the words we speak to declare our mind (Marcus Dods, *The Gospel of Saint John I*, pp. 49–50).

John the Gospel writer continues chapter 1 in high drama. The first people who saw Jesus as the Messiah observed him not in monarchial splendor, but as a Lamb. John the Baptist tells us this Lamb came to take away the sin of the world, that he first revealed himself to Israel, and that he is the Son of God. How easy it would have been to speak in lofty theological language of Old Testament themes. But John wanted no misunderstanding among his hearers, either disciples or religious leaders, so he affirmed what he knew: I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.¹

¹ Kenneth Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).