

## The Testimony of John the Baptist, John 1:19-34, BCF August 28, 2011

Today we continue with our new series on the Gospel of John with a study of the central section of John chapter 1, which I have titled "The Testimony of John the Baptist"

Probably all of us have been following the path of Hurricane Irene as she makes her way up the east coast of the USA, leaving flooding and destruction in her wake. Her impact has been and will be huge, and especially for our daughter Joy and her family, who are in the direct path of the storm near Hartford, Connecticut. There are always people, of course, who seek to find humor in life's difficulties; two of the girls born in Wilmington, NC, on Friday night as the storm hit were given the name Irene as their middle name! But Irene's physical impact is relatively minor compared with the spiritual impact that John the Baptist had on the nation of Judea around AD 27. For most people Irene will just be a bad memory a year from now, but John's teaching and message still impacts us today. So who was John, and what was his impact?

We read in **Mark 1:4-5**

*And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."*

John's gospel tells us that John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing at Bethany, a place believed to be across the river Jordan from Jerusalem. We see from these verses that John was a wildly popular preacher. He was the Frances Chan or the Billy Graham of his day, able to draw hundreds and probably thousands of people to hear his preaching. And his message was not an easy none to hear; it was not a "prosperity gospel" telling people that if they believed God would bless them with health and wealth and happiness. His message was an uncompromising one of repentance:

**Mark 1:4** *"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*

And then to add to his notoriety John even baptized people as a sign of their repentance. This was a shocking thing to the Jewish leaders of the time. Not that baptism was something new; it had been in use for many years by non-Jewish men and women (known as Gentiles) who were attracted to the spiritual and moral purity of the Jewish faith and who wished to become Jews. When such a conversion took place the males of the family were circumcised, but both males and females were baptized by self-immersion, signaling their purification from the defilement of the Gentile world. This was fine for Gentiles; all Jews accepted that Gentiles were defiled and needed cleansing. But John was doing the shocking thing of baptizing Jews. How could this be, since the Jews were God's people already? This greatly worried the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and they sent a delegation to interview John. Let us read about it in John 1:19-28

**John 1:19-28.** *Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."*

*They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"*

*He said, "I am not."*

*"Are you the Prophet?"*

*He answered, "No."*

*Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"*

*John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*

*Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"*

*"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."*

*This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

There is much to learn from this passage, but we will look today at three aspects only: **John's ministry, John's modesty, and John's message.**

Before we do this, however, we need to note the Apostle John's timescale. As we read through the first two chapters of John's gospel, the apostle clearly sets out a time frame for the events he records. If we count today's passage as day 1, then v.29, where John states "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him" is day two, and in verse 35 we read of day three John 1:35 "The next day John was there again with two of his disciples" and day four John 1:43 "The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee." And then John 2:1 "On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee." Assuming this to be the third day after leaving the John in the desert, the wedding at Cana would be on the seventh day, so chapter 1 and the first part of chapter 2 describe an eventful week in our Lord's ministry. Since John's gospel opens with the words "In the beginning was the Word", which parallels the opening of Genesis "Gen 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and which goes on to describe the seven days of creation, it is possible that John was deliberately drawing a parallel between God's first creation and the beginning of His new creation, leading up to the first miracle in Cana of Galilee. We will come back to this question of timing when we consider John's meeting with Jesus.

## **1. John's Ministry**

### ***a. Jewish expectations***

The Jewish delegation consisted of a mixture of priests and Levites. The group also included some Pharisees, and probably also some Sadducees. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of the day; they were the party of strict observance of the law. Some of them were genuine seekers after God, but sadly many of them were so engrossed in keeping up with their many detailed rules that they became proud and unforgiving. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were the theological liberals, who had accommodated themselves to Roman rule. Both groups were anxious to avoid any rocking of the boat; the Sadducees did not want any popular movement to upset their cozy relationship with their Roman overlords, while the Pharisees were jealous of their place as religious leaders and did not want any upstart teacher taking over. So they made common cause to check out this popular preacher.

To add to their concerns, this was a time of great religious expectation among the Jews. Because of their oppression by the Romans, the Jews were looking for God to come to their aid and rescue them. So they were looking for their Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet promised by Moses. The Messiah means the "anointed one" or the "Christ", who was expected to rescue the Jews from the Romans and establish a new kingdom.

### **Dan 9:25**

*"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.'*

They were also looking for a return of the prophet Elijah, who was going to get people ready for the Messiah. 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."*

And then they were looking for a new leader and prophet like Moses:

**Deut 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.*

So the feeling in Judea was one of great anticipation; when was the Messiah going to come? Could it be this year?

### ***b. John's denials***

So the delegation came to John and started to ask their questions. John knew what they were up to, so he answered their first question even before they asked it. His answer is clear and most emphatic. "He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."" He wanted no misunderstanding about that!

The second question came "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" "I am not" he replies. So they move on to their third question "Are you the Prophet". By now John is getting fed up with the questions, and he just says "No".

As an aside, some people are puzzled by John's denial that he was Elijah, because Jesus himself said that John was Elijah: Matt 11:13-15, "*For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.*"

The solution to this is surely that John did not fully understand his own mission, and it was left to Jesus to explain to his disciple the glorious truth about John's mission and purpose. He was indeed the one who turned "the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers", even though he did not understand it at the time.

### ***c. John's affirmation***

The delegation from Jerusalem was getting desperate. All they had learned was that John was not any of the people they had thought he might be. So Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" This reply is a direct allusion to Isaiah 40:3

*A voice of one calling:*

*"In the desert prepare*

*the way for the LORD;*

*make straight in the wilderness*

*a highway for our God.*

This passage refers to the way in which a city or town would receive a visiting king or emperor. Once word came that the emperor was to visit a city, the citizens would make sure that the road into the city was in good shape. They would fill in any potholes, and move rocks out of the way, so that the emperor could enter the city without any problems. Roads in some countries are still that way today; several years ago Beverly and I visited our daughter and her husband in Nigeria, and driving on the roads there was like driving on an obstacle course. John says, in effect "I am the one who is calling people to get the rocks of sin and indifference out of the way, so that when the Messiah comes he will have an easy entrance into people's hearts and minds. I am the one who is calling people to fill in the potholes of pride and selfishness and greed, so that when the Messiah comes men and women will listen to him and accept him into their lives."

## **2. John's Modesty**

Our second consideration is that of John's modesty (or humility), in that he gives all the honor and glory to Jesus. The Pharisees in the delegation from Jerusalem were not satisfied with his answer that he was the voice

of one calling in the desert, so they followed up with a question of their own. “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John does not answer the question directly, but instead replies “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” You can imagine the Pharisees looking around “who is he referring to? Where is this exalted person John is referring to?”

To understand John’s humility we need to understand the Jewish system of Rabbis and disciples. Rabbis were not paid for their teaching, so instead the disciples would perform acts of service for their rabbis. But they drew the line at the menial task of untying the teacher’s sandals.

A Rabbinic saying was “Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal thong.” So when John says he is not worthy to undo the thongs of Jesus’ sandals, he is saying that he is unworthy to do even the most menial task for the One who was to come after him.

There is a lesson here for all of us, because pride is such a deadly sin, and we so easily fall into it. None of us is as gifted as John the Baptist, and none of us have been used in the way that he was used by God. If he was not worthy to perform a menial task for Jesus, how much less worthy are we! And yet (and here is the wonderful truth of God’s grace) God has called us and chosen us and filled us with the Holy Spirit so that we can serve Him! And so long as we recognize, like John, that we are not worthy, then God can and does use us for His glory. The moment that we start to think that we are pretty good, and how lucky God is to have us on His side, is the moment when we lose our effectiveness for the kingdom of God.

And for those of you who will be leaving Blacksburg and moving into new jobs in new cities, you won’t go far wrong if you look for a church of any denomination (or no denomination) that is led by genuinely humble leaders who teach God’s word.

### 3. John’s Message

We now turn to the second part of our passage, which leads us to our consideration of John’s message.

**John 1:28-34.** *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."*

Then John gave this testimony: *"I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."*

This section relates the first physical appearance of Jesus in this gospel. Before we look at the teaching here we need to clear up one question about the timing of these events. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record that Jesus was baptized by John, and then spent 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. John does not mention these events at all; in John’s gospel Jesus appears and then the next day two of John’s disciples join him and then a third and then he heads off to Cana in Galilee for a wedding. The most likely explanation for this is that Jesus’ baptism happened before today’s story begins, and that when John sees Jesus coming toward him on the second day, Jesus has already been baptized and spent the 40 days in the desert, and has now come back to see John again before moving on to Galilee. This would also explain how John knew Jesus before he even spoke to him, since they had already met at Jesus’ baptism.

We do not have the time to look at this passage in detail, so we will focus on just one statement. In verse 29 John says "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" This verse can be seen as one of the key verses of the entire gospel of John. In making this statement, John the Baptist is giving us the heart of the gospel, which is restated by the apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy

**1 Timothy 1:15** *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”*

So what is the meaning of this phrase “the Lamb of God”? The statement would have been pregnant with meaning to the Jews of Jesus’ day. The first reference to a sacrificial lamb was in Gen 22:8, where Abraham answered his son,

*"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Another key reference is the original Jewish Passover in Exodus, where a lamb was sacrificed so that the destroying angel would pass over the Israelite home and not kill the firstborn son.*

**Ex 12:21-23.** *Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.*

And then there is **Isaiah 53:7**, where Isaiah speaks of the coming servant of the Lord  
*"he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth."*

So the image of the Lamb as a sacrificial animal that was killed in order to receive forgiveness of sins was a familiar one to the Jews, however strange it may seem to us. Lambs are simple and weak animals; the poet Denise Levertov describes them this way:

*Given that lambs  
are infant sheep, that sheep  
are afraid and foolish, and lack  
the means of self-protection, having  
neither rage nor claws, venom nor cunning,  
what then  
is this 'Lamb of God'?*

But amazingly John also tells us that this lamb – this weak and defenseless creature – is also God Himself. We have already looked at verse 23, where John states “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'” So John recognizes Jesus as the Lord. And then we have seen how John did not see himself worthy to undo Jesus’ sandals. And then in the last two verses of our passage John states 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." John the Baptist may not have understood all that he was saying, but under the influence of the Holy Spirit he spoke words of profound significance. Charles Wesley captured this significance in his immortal hymn “And can it be?”

*And can it be that I should gain  
an interest in the Savior's blood!  
Died he for me? who caused his pain!  
For me? who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

*'Tis mystery all: th' Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love divine.*

*'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;  
let angel minds inquire no more.*

And this message is the heart of the gospel; that God in His mercy took on Himself the punishment that should have been ours, and paid the price by dying for us on the cross. And this leads us then to our conclusion.

#### **4. John's challenge.**

Before we end let us make sure we understand the implications of John's statements. There are two major claims that we need to understand and make part of our lives.

a. There are probably some of you here this morning who are thinking "I would like to become a Christian, to know the forgiveness offered by Jesus. I can see the peace and joy in the lives of Christians that I know, and I want to have this same peace and joy. But how can I know this forgiveness? How can I stand before a holy God and know that my sins are forgiven?" The apostle John gives us the answer in a nutshell right here at the beginning of the gospel by quoting John the Baptist. John called Jesus "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Here is your answer: God Himself has provided the lamb as a perfect sacrifice to pay the price that we could never pay. Jesus, the God-man, the one who was and is both wholly God and yet wholly man, paid the price that we could not pay. And this death was not just for the nation of Israel, it was not just for the Jews. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the *world*." Jesus' death was for everyone; there is no race, no nationality, no ethnicity, no socio-economic status excluded. And that, my dear seeking friend, includes you, whether you are from the wilds of SW Virginia or the urbane chaos of northern Virginia, whether from the USA or from another country, whether male or female, old or young. If you are living and breathing you are part of the world that Jesus came to die for, and His death has paid the price for your sins. As Horatius Bonar wrote "Upon a life I did not live, upon a death I did not die; another's life, another's death, I stake my whole eternity."

b. But there is a second conclusion we need to draw. John understood his ministry to be that of getting a road ready for the king to ride on and to enter a city. In this analogy our lives are like cities, with roads leading up to the city gates. But if you are not a believer in Jesus, your road is full of potholes and the gate is locked shut against the king, so that he cannot enter. The potholes may be small or large, but they are there. And how did John prepare the way? How did he get the road ready? He called people to repentance: **Mark 1:4-5** "*And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" And this is a perfect illustration of what it means to become a believer in Jesus and have him enter your life as king and emperor. Before Jesus can enter our lives as the king and LORD that He is, we need to make sure the road is ready for Him. And that means getting the potholes fixed and the boulders removed, or to change to biblical language, we need to repent of our sins and open up the gates of our town so that the rightful king Jesus can enter in and take control. So if you want to become a Christian, the first step is to acknowledge that you are a sinner before a holy God, and come to him with a genuine sorrow for your sins and genuine desire for Him to take over your life as your Lord and your king. So there is road work ahead!

c. A third conclusion applies to all of us who are believers. We are all the beneficiaries of Christ's sacrifice for our sins, and we all owe our lives to Him. So how often do you thank Him? Is your salvation something you take for granted, without remembering the price that was paid? One of the many healings in Jesus ministry was of ten lepers:

**Luke 17:12-19.** *As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"*

*When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.*

*One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him-and he was a Samaritan.*

*Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"*

How often do you thank the Lord for His salvation?

May the Lord bless His word to each one of you. If anyone wishes to talk with me about anything I have said, I will be in the lobby after the service and will be happy to meet with you.

Amen