

Gospel of John Study Session 3

In the last session we examined the prologue to the Gospel of John and saw its focus on the Word. In short, we saw that the Word John described was Jesus Christ and He was the true Light given so that man might believe in God through Him. We also were introduced to a man named John the Baptist who was sent as a witness to testify as to the identity of the Light. As we pick up in this session, the apostle John is going to fill us in on the identity of John the Baptist and his role as a messenger of hope. In this session and the next, we will focus on John the Baptist and his ministry as he validates the identity of Christ and points us to the One who can fulfill our greatest hopes and needs. To do this we need to understand John's identity and his message. This session will focus on John the Baptist's identity and his message.

In C.S. Lewis wrote a series of seven books entitled the Chronicles of Narnia. The first book published in the series is called "*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*". (Chronologically in order of the plot, "*The Magician's Nephew*", which was published sixth is the first book.) In this we are introduced to the world of Narnia which was once bright and beautiful but is now grown cold and dark. The four children from the Pevensie family accidentally find themselves transported to Narnia through a magical wardrobe. When they arrive, they learn that it has been winter in Narnia for over 100 years. Evil reigns and hope is non-existent. But when the children arrive, the inhabitants slowly start to gain hope in that there was an ancient prophecy that says that before deliverance would come, sons of Adam and daughters of Eve would return to Narnia. The inhabitants of Narnia don't put their hope in the children but rather in a lion named Aslan. These children brought hope but not in themselves but in the one who was to come after them.

In the same way as we saw in our last session, God sent a messenger before He sent His Messiah. This messenger was John the Baptist and he didn't point to himself as the source of hope but rather hope would come from the One who came after him. He's what we call the forerunner of Jesus.

1. John's identity

[John 1:19-28]

Q: Who are the Jews mentioned in v.19? *(The term "Jews" is used extensively in the book of John and needs to be taken in context of the situation. The term "Jew" is used about 65 times in the book of John and is used in a variety of ways. Some times the term is used in a neutral manner. It is used in explaining a ritual to the Jewish faith for those who are removed from Palestine. (example: John 2:6). There are a few places where the term has positive overtones (salvation is from the Jews - John 4:22, Jesus Himself is a Jew - John 4:9). Some Jews believe (John 11:45) while unfortunately others seem to come to faith but then turn away (John 8:30). The term as used in John 7:1 has a geographical slant in that it is referring to the people of Judea. However, most commonly it refers to the Jewish leaders, especially those of Jerusalem and Judea (as here in 1:19) and are cast as those who actively opposed Jesus, fail to understand*

Him and finally seek His death. Yet not all religious leaders are presented negatively, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.)

A side note as to the use of the terms “priests and Levites” in v.19. A Levite is a general term for any person who was descended from Levi, one of Jacob’s 12 sons. However, God set apart Aaron, who was a Levite as the family through which the priesthood for the old covenant would come. To be a priest, to stand before the altar, offer sacrifices, enter the holy place, etc. one needed to be a priest and thus a descendant of Aaron. However, the Levites helped in the temple worship and served as musicians and temple police. John the Baptist was a Levite and his dad had been a priest though we have no evidence that John served in any priestly role before his ministry. The Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jewish people. They were largely controlled by the family of the high priest. In the Sanhedrin, as in our political system, there are various factions with their own interests and views of things. The two major sub-groups in the Jewish ruling class were the Pharisees and Saducees. All of these people, the Sanhedrin, the Levites, the priests, the Pharisees, the Saducees, the lawyers and scribes would be well educated in the Scriptures we call the Old Testament.

As we will see, John the Baptist was baptizing people in the Jordan River. As his ministry became more widely well-known, those in leadership would develop questions about this man baptizing people. It would be natural for the Sanhedrin to send an envoy of priests and Levites to question John as they would be interested in things like ritual purification.

Q: What was the first question this group asked John and what was his response? (*vv. 19-20 - Who are you? and I am not the Christ*)

Q: What was the next question the Jews asked John? (*v. 21 - Was he Elijah*)

This question seems illogical at first glance. The prophet Elijah had been dead for hundreds of years by this point in history. However, John’s appearance and life seemed eerily similar to Elijah.

[Matthew 3:4-6]

[II Kings 1:7-8]

Their similarities were deeper than skin deep. They both preached openly against sin, particularly in the lives of those who were supposed to be leading God’s people. They both called people to repent of their sins. But there was one other reason that they would have asked this question.

[Malachi 4:5]

Q: According to this verse, who will come before the day of the Lord? (*Elijah*)

Q: What was the next question the Jews asked John the Baptist concerning his identity? (*v. 21 - Are you THE prophet?*)

Notice that they asked John if he was THE prophet, not a prophet.

[Deuteronomy 18:15]

The prophet prophesied by Moses was the Messiah. The problem was the Jews did not put the two together. They considered THE prophet to be another major prophet who came before or in addition to the Messiah. Peter testified to this prophet being Jesus Christ.

[Acts 3:19-23]

Stephen also declared that this prophet Moses spoke of was the Messiah.

[Acts 7: 37-38]

This question by the Jews was actually redundant. Yet, due to their hard and unbelieving hearts, they not only missed THE prophet but also killed Him when they crucified Jesus.

Now they quit playing 20 questions with John the Baptist and come right out and ask him who he is. The Jews understood they needed to return to their leaders with more than a series of denials.

Q: How does John answer their question? (v.23 - *“He was the voice of one crying in the wilderness; make straight the way of the Lord.”*)

[Isaiah 40:1-5]

In the Old Testament, Judah sinned against God so that He destroyed their nation and carried them away into exile in Babylon. Though Isaiah prophesied that the nation would be taken into captivity in the first 39 chapters of his book, in chapter 40 he gives hope to those who would be the ones taken into captivity in Babylon (some 250 years after Isaiah wrote these words). This hope was expressed through the metaphorical sayings that the road system east of Judah needed to be improved so that the exiles could return home without any difficulty. Hills needed to be lowered, valleys raised up, roads leveled and straightened out were all part of the plan for making the journey home less arduous. God was bringing them home now and so it was time to start holding hope again and making preparations to move back to Judea.

However, while that is the original context of the passage, it came to be seen as a type or model of the final return of the Lord on a scale much larger than the Old Testament exiles and mere geography of the area. The Lord was going to bring about a greater redemption with His suffering servant (Is. 53) and really throughout the rest of the book (Is. 40-66). The New Testament authors realize that this prophecy was realized through the ministry of John the Baptist. He was the messenger sent to prepare the hearts of the people before the actual Messiah arrived. Though as John said, he wasn't the Messiah; he was the one announcing his coming so people needed to prepare their hearts in accordance with His arrival by repenting of their sins. In essence, John is crying out that men need to prepare themselves for God's salvation, which is now at hand.

Q: What preparation is necessary for one to receive God's salvation? (*The preparation needs to*

be that a person recognizes that they are a sinner, separated from God by their sin and that only by believing and receiving personally the sacrificial death of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, can one be forgiven and saved.)

Q: What is the next question that the Jews ask John the Baptist? (v.25 - *"Why then are you baptizing if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah or the Prophet?"*)

We need to understand the baptism of John. What was its purpose? If he wasn't the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet, then why is he doing this?

[Mark 1:4-6]

Q: Why was John baptizing people? *(As they confessed their sins, it was a visible sign of their repentance. The baptism did not give the person a repentant heart nor did it confer any grace. It was merely an outward symbol of what God was doing in a person's heart. It was these peoples' opportunity to publically testify that they were turning from their sins towards God. They would then wait by faith for God to bring the promised Messiah. Which for this group of people would not be long at all. This is how John was fulfilling his role as the voice crying in the wilderness.)*

Q: What does John have to say about his own baptism? (vv. 26-27 - *it is merely by water but there is One among their midst who is greater than himself*)

John in essence is saying that *"Yes, I have authority from God to baptize but my baptism is nothing compared to the One who comes after me."* The taking off of a person's shoe is the work of a slave - not a great religious leader. Notice the difference in tone between John and the religious leaders. They are condescending and arrogant while John is humble throughout this encounter and points them to Christ. They are demanding to know by what right is he baptizing the people and he is gently pointing them to Jesus. He does what he can do to make sure he doesn't confuse himself with the Messiah but he does want them to know that they don't know that the Messiah is already in their midst and also he wants them to come to know Jesus, like these others.

A quick side note. The Bethany in v.28 is not the Bethany associated with Jesus' friends (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus). That Bethany was east and south of Jerusalem on the road to Jericho. This Bethany was actually up in the north east section of Israel and was called Bashan in the Old Testament. It was right along the Jordan River and away from Jerusalem.

Repeatedly it is noted of John the Baptist that he is a witness of Jesus Christ. He spent his life pointing people to Jesus. There was a comedian who once was asked about his religion. He responded that he was a "Jehovah's Bystander". They wanted him to be a witness but he didn't want to get involved. I hope that our lives and speech prove our participation in the gospel as opposed to just sitting on the sidelines.

2. John's message

[John 1:29-34]

Q: What is the first thing John testifies about Jesus? (v.29 - "*Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*")

To understand this announcement by John, we need to understand that there are three things John meant (what any Jew would be expected to know) about a lamb being offered as a sacrifice.

1. The lamb provides a sacrifice.

This account took place just days before the annual Passover celebration (2:13). The focus of the Passover celebration was the sacrifice of a lamb which served as a reminder of God's deliverance of Israel from captivity in Egypt. In Exodus 12 the original Passover commandment is given by God to Moses. Each family had to kill a lamb at twilight and spread its blood on the doorposts and lintel of the house. God was going to send death to every house in Egypt but if a house had the blood of a lamb on the doorposts and lintel, death would pass over that house. As the Jews congregated in Jerusalem each year to celebrate this annual memorial and remember the mighty act of God in delivering His people from Egypt, each family would bring a lamb to the Temple to be sacrificed on the altar.

Lambs were not only sacrificed at Passover but also every day of the year at the Temple. One was killed every morning and one was killed every evening. John the Baptist's father was a priest and each day when he served at the Temple, he would have returned home with blood soaked clothes. The lambs' blood was essential due to sin. Their blood had to be spilled for the sins of the people to be covered.

[Hebrews 9:18-23]

These lambs were not an end in themselves. They did not remove sin but only covered it up temporarily until the next sacrifices were offered. These sacrifices pointed to the One who would be sent from God to shed His perfect sinless blood so that sin could be forgiven forever.

[Hebrews 7:23-28]

Jesus was the lamb of God sent to offer His life as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of all mankind - to anyone who would draw near to Him. This is what was prophesied by Isaiah in the last section of his book, the section of hope and restoration, that we were mentioning earlier when John claimed to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

[Isaiah 53:7]

2. The lamb provides a substitute

Q: Under the Law, who was responsible for bringing the lamb to be a sacrifice for sin? (*the sinner*)

Q: Who brought the Lamb of God to be sacrificed for sin? (*God did*)

Q: Since God did not have any sins of His own that required a sacrifice, why did God sacrifice Jesus, the Lamb of God? (*As a substitute. Jesus was our way of escape from the damage done by our sin and from the bounds of the Law. God sent Jesus because He was the only being in all of creation who would completely pay for the penalty of the sin of all mankind. Jesus alone was sinless and perfect. He died in our place for our sin. Only the death of perfect, sinless Jesus was sufficient to pay the horrific penalty of sin. Jesus was not just a lamb of God but rather the lamb of God. Only through Jesus do we find forgiveness for our sin.*)

Did you notice that the religious leaders sent to interrogate John the Baptist didn't ask him whether or not he came as the lamb of God? They were hoping for the Messiah, a king, a mighty prophet - someone to liberate them from Roman tyranny. However, they didn't realize they needed to be liberated from their sin first. They weren't looking for a lamb and they certainly didn't want one.

[Revelation 5:5-12]

This glimpse of worship in heaven reveals to us that the Lion from the tribe of Judah has conquered. But when John looked to see this lion, instead he sees a lamb that had been slain. Again in v.12 all are bowing down to the lamb who was slain. The word slain literally is the word meaning to be butchered, often used of how sacrificial animals were killed. This further describes the meaning of the substitutionary death of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

3. The lamb provides satisfaction

The sacrifice of Jesus fully satisfies the demands of justice. Our sin demands punishment (death) but the death of Jesus fulfilled that punishment that justice demands. God is loving and merciful but also holy and just. Holiness demands that God's wrath be poured out on sinners.

[Romans 2:4-5]

However, Jesus, the Lamb of God took the wrath due us upon Himself. Imagine this, the full and total wrath of God for sinners was poured out upon Jesus, the precious Son of God and treasure of His Father's heart. Jesus' death satisfied God's holy and just requirement and His wrath so that we could be justified and declared righteous before God for all time.

[Romans 5:6-11]

This passage shows us the power of the blood of Jesus shed on our behalf and depths of its ability to satisfy God's holy nature. Look back at v.9 - "*Much more than...*" The blood of Jesus didn't just satisfy God's wrath but it also reconciled us to God. This is the foundation of grace.

[I John 2:1-2]

The word “propitiation” means one who satisfies or atones for something. Jesus is the One whose death satisfied the Father so that we could be brought near to Him and live lives apart from sin. The main thrust of John’s message was then that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. However there was more to his message.

Q: Who was born first, John the Baptist or Jesus? (*John the Baptist by at least three months. Luke 1:39-56 recalls this account.*)

Q: How then does John the Baptist make the statement that Jesus existed before him in v.30? (*Because Jesus, as God the Son, has always existed. He is an eternal being. It was just in the incarnation when Jesus took on human flesh that his earthsuit was younger than John the Baptist’s earthsuit.*)

Q: How did John the Baptist come to recognize Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? (*vv. 31-33 - John was told that the person whom he saw the Spirit of God, being manifested as dove and remaining on that person, that’s the Messiah*)

Q: What was the difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus? (*v.33 - Jesus would baptize people in the Holy Spirit not just water. John’s baptism was ceremonial and outward while Jesus’ was an internal, heart changing baptism that cannot be seen outwardly, at least until the person begins acting in line with the Holy Spirit’s indwelling.*)

There is something that needs to be inserted here concerning baptism. Believer’s baptism, that which is one of the two ordinances in evangelical churches, is purely symbolic. It imparts no grace whatsoever. It is the outward sign of the inward change that has already happened. Yet, John just pointed out that Jesus’ baptism then is not an outward baptism. It’s a baptism of the heart, an inward one that brings the Holy Spirit into one’s life. Remember that baptism is a sign of death. For John, his baptism was incomplete and symbolized the person’s putting sins to death. For believer’s baptism, it symbolizes us putting to death our entire old sinful nature and way of life and being raised up to a new life in Christ - full of the Spirit. However, the Holy Spirit is already indwelling the believer before the outward baptism. There is no point in baptizing people who have not first received the Holy Spirit by faith in Christ. So the baptism of John we’d call incomplete from the standpoint of it just signifying the person putting to death the sins of their life but needing to wait for God in faith until He brought about the Messiah would be the perfect sacrifice for the sin of mankind and be able to fully forgive and expunge the guilt of the person. Believer’s baptism, that we practice is the completed form of this baptism in that it goes beyond just dealing with the sinner wanting to confess and turn from sin but also that Christ has been accepted and now changed the sinner into a saint and that this person now has a new life in Christ. Believer’s baptism is the mode of baptism in the age of grace whereas John the Baptist’s baptism was under the Law. (Again, neither of these baptisms are anything but symbolic as they offer no grace and are mere external signs of an already existent internal state of being.) Then there is the baptism of Christ which is the internal acceptance of Christ. It is the reality behind both of the other outward symbols of baptism as Jesus’ is a heart baptism that changes the person’s heart and nature and brings that person into a relationship with God whereby the Holy Spirit permanently indwells the believer.

There is one other singular baptism mentioned in Scripture that needs to be addressed here. This is the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:13-17). John resisted Jesus' request at first, humbly stating that he needed to be baptized by Jesus. However, Jesus, said that it was to fulfill righteousness that He needed John to baptize Him. Jesus had no sins and was not therefore had no sins to confess or repent from. And remember that baptism is the sign of a death. What was Jesus putting to death? He was putting to death the former life as a child of His earthly parents and the life before His public ministry so that He could now fulfill the purpose that His Father had in sending Him to earth in the first place. This baptism was Jesus' public inauguration into ministry.

Q: When John saw the Holy Spirit descending as a dove upon Jesus, how long did the Spirit stay upon Jesus? (*vv. 32-33 - The word "remained/remaining is used twice in these verses. The word remain means to stay in a given place, to abide or continue to dwell, to be present or to tarry.*)

Q: Why do you think that it was important for John the Baptist to use that word to the Jews who were asking him these questions? (*In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit only rested upon people for a temporary period of time. He would be with people long enough to do what God wanted done and then leave. The Old Testament prophets had the Spirit of the Lord upon them here and there as God desired but the Spirit didn't stay within anyone forever under the Law. However, in this New Covenant of grace, the Holy Spirit would not just rest upon people but would remain upon/in them permanently. He would dwell or continue to be present in them forever. This is a major shift in the way God deals with mankind to actually take up residence within those who put their faith in Jesus.*)

Notice that John testified that he didn't know Jesus before the dove came to remain on Him. He wasn't saying that he didn't know Jesus at all or this was their first ever encounter. It was probable, though unknown to us, that Jesus and John the Baptist could have met each other earlier in life before either started their public ministries as they were related to each other. What John is saying is that he did not recognize Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, the person he was called to point out to the masses, until the Spirit of God remained upon Him and he saw this.

John the Baptist ends this section with a personal testimony that he saw these things and that Jesus, this Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is the Son of God. The "I have seen and have testified" are in the perfect tense meaning that these are not just thoughts but rather settled convictions that have been well thought out and verified in his soul to be the facts. So we see that John's teaching encompasses the truth that Jesus is the Lamb of God, He is also the eternal Son of God and the One who baptizes or grants the permanent placement of the Holy Spirit.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?