

John 1:19-34: The Testimony of John the Baptist

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”²¹ And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”²² So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”²³ He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”²⁶ John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” – John 1:19-34, ESV

Introduction: Wild-Eyes Prophets

When you hear the name “John the Baptist,” what mental picture comes into your mind? Honestly, what is your emotional reaction to that mental picture? Do you think of someone with long, wild, dirty hair, dressed in smelly animal skins and eating bugs? This mental picture probably comes from the description of John in Matthew 3:4, “Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” We’re also told that John preached and baptized out in the wilderness, which adds to our mental image of someone who might seem a little mentally unstable and overly emotional.

But if we think more carefully about why John dressed the way he did, ate what he did and ministered where he did, it might help us get a more accurate assessment of the man. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist because he was a prophet. These were clothes that identified him as a prophet, almost a uniform for prophets. 2 Kings 1:8 tells us that Elijah wore a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist. Thus, John was dressed like Elijah, considered by most to be the greatest prophet in the history of Israel before John.

As a prophet, John confronted the powerful, calling everyone to repentance, including rulers and high priests and Jewish council members. Eventually, such confrontations with those in power would get John arrested and beheaded, but during his ministry, it was best for him to be in the wilderness areas. In the wilderness, he was more likely to be left alone by those in power. Also, since he was called to baptize, he needed access to water. In and around cities and towns, the water was always controlled by the authorities and gaining access to use it for baptisms would not have been easy for John.

As far as his diet of locusts and wild honey is concerned, what do you expect him to eat in the wilderness? This was actually a very good diet for someone living in wilderness areas. Locusts – likely grasshoppers – were common food for poor people in the ancient world and are rich in protein and not much different than eating shrimp or crabs or lobster, really. So, far from being some super-eccentric crazy man, John’s dress and location and diet actually all make sense for His calling.

When we come to read about John the Baptist in the Apostle John’s Gospel, we find that John leaves out much of the material we find in Matthew, Mark and Luke and puts in other material not recorded in those Gospels. This is very common practice for John, who probably assumed that people had already read at least one of the other Gospels, and so he felt like it was important to cover new ground. With John the Baptist, we do not see him baptize Jesus, although he makes reference to it in this passage. We also do not hear him preach his message of repentance. We do see a confrontation between John and a group of Jewish leaders from Jerusalem, something not recorded in the other Gospels.

I. The Identity of John the Baptist, vv. 19-24

Some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, those belonging to the minority Pharisee party, sent priests and Levites to figure out who John claimed to be and why he was doing what he was doing. These Jewish leaders had already had to deal with several false Messiahs who led groups of people into rebellion. They had suffered crack-downs from Rome and would suffer more in the years ahead. Thus, they wanted to know who this wilderness preacher dressed like a prophet really was, or at least, who he claimed to be.

A. Who He Was Not

The Apostle John records John the Baptist’s denials in very strong language. He writes, “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’” Why did John use such emphatic language? Perhaps because some of John the Baptist’s followers were still confused and might have

been confusing others about who John was. Maybe because some Jewish leaders who were followers of neither John the Baptist nor Jesus were making comparisons between the two and using John to disprove the claims of Jesus' followers that Jesus was the Messiah.

Whatever the Apostle John's reasons were, his recording of John the Baptist's words in this verse is very clear and shows us a man who is humble and faithful. He did not make any false claims about himself. He said, "I am not the Christ." He then went on to deny that he was Elijah and that he was "the Prophet."

We understand why John said he wasn't the Messiah, but what about these other denials? Well, Elijah the prophet did not die. He was taken by God in a flaming chariot. Then, in the very last part of the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, God says, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*" (Malachi 4:5-6) After 400 years of silence from God following these verses, the people of God were eagerly waiting for Elijah.

Now Jesus Himself said in the other Gospels that John the Baptist was Elijah. Matthew records this clearly:

"For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." – Matthew 11:13-14

"He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist." – Matthew 17:11-13

But Jesus did not mean that John was literally Elijah himself. In Matthew 17, three disciples, including John, had just seen Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. They recognized Elijah as Elijah, not John the Baptist. What Jesus meant is that John the Baptist was the Elijah-like figure promised in Malachi. John the Baptist himself denied being Elijah because he wasn't literally Elijah; he was an Elijah-type figure, which is what God had promised to send as a forerunner.

The question about "the Prophet" comes from a prophesy of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen" This prophet promised by Moses was the Messiah himself, not John the Baptist, who was a prophet, but not THE prophet, who was Jesus.

B. Who He Was

Exasperated, the delegation wants to know, *“Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”*

In answering, John goes to Isaiah 40, which Matthew, Mark and Luke also use to explain who John the Baptist was: *“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”*

John’s role was not about himself. He was the forerunner. He was calling for repentance so that people would be ready for Messiah. And his ministry was very effective in this way. Those who listened to John and were baptized by him were much more likely to listen to Jesus. Those who refused to hear John’s message also refused to hear Jesus.

II. The Ministry of John the Baptist, vv. 25-28

As soon as these delegates had gotten a straight answer from John, they then demanded to know why John was baptizing, since he was not the Christ nor Elijah himself not the promised Prophet.

A. What He Was Called to Do

John’s ministry was preaching a message of repentance and then baptizing people with a baptism of repentance. He was authoritatively, boldly calling people to turn from their sins, seek the Lord and be baptized as a sign of repentance and a desire for cleansing.

Baptism had been practiced for years by converts to Judaism from among the gentiles. When a gentile was ready to turn away from false gods and join the one true God and His people, Israel, he would baptize himself as a cleansing, to prepare himself to be accepted among the people. This ritual was rooted in the idea that gentiles were unclean.

John was now calling Jewish people to be baptized, including Jewish leaders. He was acting as if they were unclean and needed cleansing in order to be ready for Messiah. He was even so bold as to baptize people, instead of allowing people to baptize themselves.

John’s message and ministry of baptism were the same: God’s people did need cleansing and they could not cleanse themselves. God had said this again and again to His people, but their pride kept them from hearing it. He had told His circumcised people that they needed to circumcise their hearts, but they could not, so He would circumcise their hearts for them. He had said to His

people in Ezekiel 36:25-26: *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”*

John was sent to baptize people as a sign of this promised cleansing.

B. What He Was Not Worthy to Do

Even though John was commissioned by God to baptize, and he had the authority to call people to repent and baptize them with a baptism of repentance, he was very clear about how unworthy he was compared to the Messiah: *John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”*

The disciples of a rabbi would follow him and serve him in many ways. They would often secure lodging and transportation, handle finances, prepare meals, etc. They were not only disciples but were servants to their rabbi, but there were limits to their service. They were not slaves, and some things they would not do. Among the tasks considered to be beneath the dignity of a rabbi’s disciples was bending down to unstrap the rabbi’s sandals in order to wash his feet. This was reserved for household slaves.

John said that the Messiah was so much greater than he was that John was not even worthy of doing the service of a household slave to Him. Of course, this understanding will make Jesus’ actions in John 13, when he washes His disciples’ feet, even more powerful.

C. Where He Ministered

Finally, as the Apostle John closes out this day’s narrative, he points out where John was ministering – in Bethany across the Jordan, or Bethany on the other side of the Jordan. Crossing the Jordan River in the wilderness to get to John the Baptist would have reminded all Jewish people of the Exodus, and this was intentional, as John was leading the way for a new Exodus, a new definitive redemptive event for God’s people.

III. The Testimony of John the Baptist, vv. 29-34

A. The Lamb of God

And so the Apostle John has put the Exodus into the minds of his readers as he prepares them for the words John the Baptist says the next day when he sees Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

We don’t know for sure exactly what John had in mind when he said these words. It’s true that Jesus was like the Passover lambs of Exodus. Jesus would cover the sins of His people and save them from God’s wrath, just as the blood of the Passover lambs covered the people of God from His wrath in the Exodus. John the Baptist’s water baptism pictured the cleansing which Jesus’ blood would actually accomplish.

We also know that John the Baptist was very familiar with the prophet Isaiah, and Isaiah 53 describes the sufferings of the Messiah and compares Messiah to a lamb:

*Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth. – Isaiah 53:4-7, ESV*

Both Passover and Isaiah 53 associate lambs with the covering of sin or the atonement for sin, which is exactly what Jesus had come to do – to take away the sin of the world.

B. The Spirit of God

To show John the Baptist that Jesus Himself was the Messiah, the Anointed One, and to empower Jesus the man for His ministry as Messiah, God the Father anointed Him with the Holy Spirit at His baptism. Here, John the Baptist doesn't explicitly say that the Spirit came upon Jesus at His baptism, but we know it did from the other Gospels.

The Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and remained on Jesus. This was a sign of the Spirit's holy, gentle, peaceful and abiding anointing on Jesus for His calling as Messiah. Isaiah prophesied this anointing for the Messiah three times, in Isaiah 11, 42 and 61 – so we know John the Baptist was very familiar with Isaiah:

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. – Isaiah 11:1-3a*

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. – Isaiah 42:1*

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound – Isaiah 60:1*

John says, "I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' It's not that John didn't know Jesus of Nazareth at all; after all, they were cousins. But John did not know that this Jesus was the Messiah, that He was the One sent by God to baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. But once John saw the Spirit resting and remaining on Jesus, he knew that Jesus was the ultimate Anointed One, the Messiah, the One who received the Holy Spirit, not just for Himself, but in order to be able to baptize others with the Holy Spirit, too.

C. The Son of God

Once John the Baptist saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus and knew that He was the Messiah, John did not hold back from testifying. He proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” and “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Did John the Baptist understand fully what he meant by “Son of God”? Maybe not, but his words were inspired prophecy. To many Jewish people, “Son of God” was a title for Messiah that meant that the Messiah was the King of Israel. When we studied Psalm 2 this past summer as a Messianic Psalm, we learned that this psalm was a coronation psalm, sung on the day of the crowning of the King of Israel. Psalm 2:7 says, “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”

But John said more than he knew in his testimony, which was faithful and true, inspired by God. Jesus was and is the Son of God!

Conclusion: Humble Boldness

John the Baptist is a model Spirit-empowered witness. He was as humble as he was bold. He was knowledgeable of the Scriptures and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Only a sound knowledge of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit can make us so sincerely humble and bold. On our own, we will either be humble and weak and timid or bold and arrogant and pushy. We need God to prepare us to be witnesses like John the Baptist, witnesses whose confidence comes not from ourselves but from the word of God and the Spirit of God. May God be pleased to make us such witnesses!