

## Witnesses of Jesus

John 1:19–51

Studies in John #2

**T**HIS is the story of the Son of God on earth. If I call it a story does that change your perception? I think we so often turn to the Bible either to get personal tidbits of application for our daily life in a cubicle or to get mind-blowing theology; but in doing so, we miss something huge. Creation, rebellion, redemption, and consummation is a story. I said when we were in the book of Daniel that history is *His*-story. And the great thing is that by faith, this is the story of *our* God, *our* Savior.

So we move from the so-called “prologue” (1:1–18) to the historical narrative or story of John’s Gospel. And taking this big chunk of material in 1:19–51 what we have are four witnesses of Jesus. Really, it’s the witness of John we were introduced to in the early verses and how his witness led to three men to see Jesus, follow him, remain with him, and tell others about him.

### **JOHN’S WITNESS (VV. 19–34)**

The focus is especially on JOHN’S WITNESS as verse 19 opens: **and this is the testimony of John**. The Gospel mentioned him before as “a man sent from God” who “came as a witness, to bear witness about the light (vv. 6, 7, 8, 15). And he’s so strange! The usual custom in those days was to identify someone as “John, son of Zechariah” or “John of Jerusalem.” But we’re just told he was

sent from God without any genealogy or geography. Because of his being an anomaly **the Jews sent priests** (those of the family of Aaron who served in the temple) **and Levites** (those from the wider tribe of Levi who served as musicians and temple police) **from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”**

There’s something here that really important to spend a few minutes on. Most English translations say **the Jews**. I was listening to a lecture by a Yale professor on this very chapter and he said John says some really nasty things in his Gospel about “the Jews.” But the Greek term that is used is οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, which we can translate as “the Judeans.” Judea was the name of the entire Roman Province, but it was also the name of one region that made up King Herod’s rule. To be a Judean was to be a Jew, but to be a Jew was not necessarily to be a Judean. Like being a Californian is to be an American (debatable by some!), but to be an American is not necessarily to be a Californian. That’s why John says the disciples in this story were from another region of Herod’s kingdom in Galilee in verse 43, Jesus says Nathanael was an “Israelite” (v. 47), and Nathanael speaks of Jesus as the “King of Israel” (v. 49).<sup>1</sup> The point is that Christianity is not inherently “anti-Semitic”—we must *never* allow ourselves to devolve into being as sadly many have. It’s a sin we must repent of! The Gospel writer John is not making a racially charged statement; Jesus, John the Baptizer, and John the Evangelist were Semitic

themselves! And he's not even speaking religiously; John goes on to record Jesus' words, "Salvation is of the Jews" (4:22). As the NIV interprets helpfully, he's speaking specifically of "the Judean leaders." John goes on to specify that **they had been sent from the Pharisees** (v. 24). The Jewish leadership was called the Sanhedrin. It consisted of two factions: **the Pharisees** and the Sadducees. The Pharisees considered themselves the spiritual elite as they descended from those who resisted Antiochus Epiphanes' regime (175–163BC) and his attempts to erase Jewish religion. Most of the priests and Levites, though, belonged to the Sadducee party. While the Sadducees were known to stick to the letter of the law the Pharisees were known for their oral traditions that interpreted the law to every new contexts.<sup>2</sup> So there's this strange character without genealogical or geographical reference to his name who apparently has been ministering for some time. Verse 28 tells us he's out **in Bethany across the Jordan** (v. 28)<sup>3</sup>—the wilderness; the place of wandering; the place of exile. And people were going out there, leaving all behind, to prepare for the advent of the Lord. When word got back to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem they send a delegation to check out what's going on for themselves.

I want you to see here that John's witness is not about himself, but all about the Messiah. The Gospel states his answer very strongly: **he confessed**,

**and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ,”** meaning the Messiah (v. 20). It’s interesting that their question says nothing about the Messiah but he immediately denies he is him! Jewish hope in the first century was varied. Some simply expected a kingly Davidic Messiah to free from Roman reign. Others like those out in the wilderness at Qumran expected a priestly Messiah as well as “the prophet” like Moses of Deuteronomy 18. The Samaritans identified this prophet as the Messiah himself. Then there was Malachi’s prophecy of Elijah coming back before the Day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5). So in general, end times expectation was for some combination of three men to appear: the Messiah, Elijah, and the prophet like Moses. John denies he’s the Messiah. John denies being **Elijah** too (v. 21). But Mark’s Gospel says John’s dress and diet were described in Elijanic terms (Mark 1:6; 2 Kgs. 1:8) and Jesus said John was the fulfillment of Elijah (Matt. 11:14; 17:12; Mark 9:13; Luke 1:17). The best explanation is that Jesus understood his significance better than John did.<sup>4</sup> And that matches John’s self-deprecating attitude here. So they finally ask, **“Are you the Prophet?”** But again, John said he was not.

All these denials cause the Judean leaders to press for a positive ID: **“Who are you? ... What do you say about yourself?”** (v. 22) **“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said”** (v. 23). That’s how the angel described John: “he will

turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God...to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:16–17). His father Zechariah said, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76). John calls himself the “voice” of Isaiah 40. If you watched the State of the Union you know there is a man whose office is to be a “crier.” Back in the days of the first century whenever a king or dignitary would enter a town he sent an emissary to prepare the way by announcing his coming. John is not the Messiah, but the crier who comes before the to proclaim Messiah’s coming.

So John confesses he is **neither the *Messiah*, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet** so this delegation asks, **“Then why are you baptizing?”** (v. 25) Why are they asking? Some Jewish groups practiced baptism for those who converted to the God of Abraham. Others like those at Qumran took Ezekiel 36:25 and the promise of the Lord’s washing his people as justification for daily baptism! But what’s interesting is that these two kinds of first century baptisms were *self-*administered. Yet *John* is baptizing. It’s curious. It’s shocking. The natural question is, “By what authority?”<sup>5</sup> His answer is amazing: **“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”** (vv. 26–27).

John is saying he is not some guru with great authority. He says this in a way they would've understood: **“the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”** There was a traditional saying, later attributed to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: “A disciple should do for his teacher anything a slave would do—except take off his shoes.”<sup>6</sup> Disciples were low, but not *that* low!<sup>7</sup> But John turns it on its head: he's lower than a slave and not as **“worthy”** of a slave's service!

His witness is not about himself, but all about the Messiah and we see that as **the next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said,** **“Behold, the Lamb of God (ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ), who takes away the sin of the world! (v. 29)<sup>8</sup>** This is one of those great universal statements about Jesus. Notice the context is not a controversy about how God's eternal election, Christ's historical death, and the response of those who believe intertwine. It's a proclamation! We are to proclaim this message without differentiation and distinction to all. The sin of the *world!* Christ is a universal Savior. He is the Lamb of God for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, black and white and everything in between! He is the seed of Abraham who will bless all the nations of the world, not just Israel. Behold the Lamb provided by God himself to take your place on the cross just as the ram was provided in the place Isaac (Gen. 22). Behold the reality of the daily offering of

lambs in the tabernacle and temple (Ex. 29:38). Behold your Passover Lamb covering you from God's judgment (Ex. 12; 1 Cor. 5:7). Behold your Suffering Servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12): a “man of sorrows,” who’s “borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” who was “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities,” by whose “stripes we are healed,” upon whom “the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all” and “led as a lamb (ἀμνὸς) to the slaughter.”

This sacrificial lamb was also the glorious Son: **“this is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me’”** (v. 30). How did John know this? **“I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”** Then he says **“I saw,”** using a perfect tense to express a settled conviction: **“I have seen.”** What did he see? **“The Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him”** (vv. 31–32). Why is this so important? This is how John would know who the Messiah was: **“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’”** (v. 33). One of the promises of the coming Messiah was Isaiah 11 and its description of the Spirit-anointed Davidic king. Unlike the prophets, priests, and kings of the Old Testament who received the Spirit off and on when they

ministered, Messiah would have the Spirit permanently. Note John's witness was not about what *he* saw, but about the contrast between his preparatory water baptism and Messiah's ultimate Spirit baptism. Just like Israel had to undergo a preparatory purification by washing before the Lord would enter into a covenant with them at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:10, 14), John was preparing this Old Covenant people one final time for the coming of something new. And he makes one last word of witness: **"I have seen** (again, a perfect tense) **and have borne witness** (another perfect) **that this is the Son of God"** (v. 42).<sup>9</sup>

This anointing is vital as we continually endeavor to establish a lasting Reformed church in this community. Messiah has three offices of prophet, priest, and king. We "share in [his] anointing" so that we may as prophets confess his name, as priests present ourselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness, and as kings fight against sin and the devil in this life (HC, Q&A 32). We share in Jesus' anointing! Let's confess and proclaim his name to everyone: **"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**

### **ANDREW'S WITNESS (VV. 35–42)**

We move from John's witness about the true light of the world to its effects on those in darkness. There are three brief accounts of those who "see," which is double entendre for believe in Jesus, who follow Jesus, which is



double entendre for being a disciple or follower, who remain with Jesus, and who tell others to see, follow, and remain with him too. Let's look briefly at ANDREW'S WITNESS.

Again **the next day...John and two of his disciples** (v. 35) see **Jesus** and John says, **"Behold, the Lamb of God!"** (v. 36) The text describes immediate results: **The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed** (v. 37).

That's a powerful calling that only a sovereign God in irresistible grace can accomplish. Amen? A herald plants a seed and waters, but God gives the growth. If you don't know Jesus today or if you're not sure if really has forgiven your sins: **Behold, the Lamb of God! Follow him!**

For the first time in the Gospel we hear Jesus' voice: **"What are you seeking?"** (v. 38) If you could hear Jesus say anything to you, what would it be? I'm amazed at these words! He doesn't accuse them of being filthy sinners who are unworthy! He doesn't tie them up in theological knots! He asks *them* a gentle question: **"What are you seeking?"** Again it's double entendre for, "What are you *really* seeking?" Their answer is all you need to know about their desires: **"Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"** (v. 38) They see Jesus, they follow Jesus, and they remain with Jesus. It's funny because they really have no idea what they're asking. We know the prologue

where the Son of God has been in the bosom of the Father for all eternity—and they’re asking Jesus where he’s staying! Jesus says, **“Come and you will see”** (v. 39). So memorable was this moment that they could recount later to John as he wrote: **it was about the tenth hour** (v. 39).

After all this we’re given a name of **one of these two who heard John speak and followed Jesus: Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother** (v. 40). By holding the names back it’s as if John is saying, “It doesn’t matter the names; anyone can be a disciple.” In response to seeing, following, and remaining, Andrew **first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ)** (v. 41). Εὕρισκει. As we’ve Anglicized this word: “Eureka!” We’ve found the one the prophets said would come, the one all our hopes and dreams are bound up in—the anointed One! Then **he brought Peter to Jesus and Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter)** (v. 42).<sup>10</sup>

### **PHILIP’S WITNESS (VV. 43–46)**

Next look at PHILIP’S WITNESS. Again the narrative says **the next day** and our ESV translates **Jesus**. The Greek text says *he*.<sup>11</sup> I believe it’s actually referring to Andrew since everyone in the story tells another about Jesus. So Andrew **decided to go to Galilee**. Why? Verse 44 says **Philip was from**

**Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.** He's from here and wanted to find **Philip**; when he did he said simply **"follow me"** (v. 43). Then we read of **Philip who found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him—** Εὐρίσκει**—of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph"** (v. 45). **The Law and...the prophets** is code for the entire Old Testament—and Jesus is about it all! But **Nathanael** says almost famous last words: **"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"** (v. 46) Why does he say that? The Judeans despised the Galileans to the north; and here fellow-Galileans despised one of their own town of Nazareth! Philip's answer: **"Come and see,"** quoting Jesus himself! (v. 46; cf. v. 39)

### **NATHANAEL'S WITNESS (VV. 47–51)**

The final part of the narrative is NATHANAEL'S WITNESS. Now **Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him...**"Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom **there is no deceit!"** (v. 47) using a line from Psalm 32. Being without deceit means that you are upright in your relation to your neighbor. **Nathanael's** question, **"How do you know me?"** is better **"From where do you know me?"** We say, "I don't know him from Adam." Nathanael's saying the same! **Jesus,** the master evangelist, draws Nathanael: **"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you"** (v. 48). Jesus uses Old Testament imagery

where to sit under and eat from your own fig tree is metaphor for home (Isa. 36:16; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10). We often make this sound as if Jesus was a superman with x-ray vision to see everyone, everywhere.<sup>12</sup> We learn later that Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee (21:2). Do you know which town was near Cana? Nazareth. Jesus is saying that he's see Philip in his own home environment and seen his godliness. Nathanael's response was, **“Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”** (v. 49)

Amazingly Jesus' responded: **“Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these”** (v. 50).

Now that Jesus has gathered his first disciples he prepares them for what is to come in his ministry. John's also preparing us, the reader, for more accounts of Jesus' glory. And one of them is Jesus' own self-witness at the end: **“Truly, truly—Amen, Amen, I say to you (plural), you (plural) will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”** (v. 51).

## Endnotes

J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 1–6* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 3:15.

<sup>1</sup> John uses the term 70 times while Matthew only 5, Mark 6, and Luke 5. See the discussion in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 44–46, who take this term geographically. Compare the more nuanced discussion of its diverse use in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 141–142; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 130–131. This discussion of its geographical use, limiting it to the Jewish leadership among the region of Judea is missed by Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 62–63.

<sup>2</sup> See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 144–145.

<sup>3</sup> We're familiar with Jerusalem. Bethany is not so much, but we know where it was just southeast of Jerusalem. "Bethany across the Jordan," though, we're unsure. If it's due east of Bethany across the Jordan then there was a Qumran community along the Dead Sea on the way. Carson follows the line of scholarship that sees "Bethany across the Jordan" as Batanea (Bashan in the Old Testament), which was northeast and outside the Tetrarchy of Herod Antipas and within the Tetrachy of Philip. *The Gospel According to John*, 146–147.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 143.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 145.

<sup>6</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (1956; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 266–267.

<sup>7</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 44. Malina and Rohrbaugh say "the implication is that John's status is low indeed." I am arguing that John is saying more than he's low, but that he's even beneath a slave.

<sup>8</sup> For the background and meaning, see the discussion in Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 148–151.

<sup>9</sup> On "Son of God" being a term used for the Roman Emperor: "Tiberias Caesar, son of the God Augustus," see Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> On the meaning of this name, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 156.

<sup>11</sup> On the interpretation of ἠθέλησεν referring to Andrew and *not* Jesus, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> See Carson on this being an instance of Jesus "showing...his supernatural knowledge." *The Gospel According to John*, 161.