

John 1.19-34 / COB / 01.12.14

Introduction

- † [Slide 1:] Do any of you go by several nicknames or are called by several nicknames? Any that are amusing or really distinctive?
- Is Jesse called “the track mac-daddy” by his racing friends? Now that Dan has studied so much theology under John, so we refer to him as “Bibleman”? [tominotor example?]
 - Some of you call me Pastor Will, some of you call me Will, the youngsters call me Pastor Groben or Pastor Will; my long-held friends mostly call me just Groben or Bill, while many in my family still think of me as Billy. More significantly, I have several identifying roles, including pastor, husband, son, brother, friend...
 - Sometimes I call my cats fat sausages; other times I call them rodents, fuzzballs, pretty kitties, handsome fellas, snuggle bunnies, purr monsters, silly beans, and good boys, though really, no matter what I call them, their identity is beloved pets.
- † Last week, we saw Jesus referred to as the Son of God, the full revelation of God, the eternal creator, the promised Messiah/Christ and Lord, the Savior, and the Light that is Life. These are not just nicknames, they are identifications of who Jesus really is.
- Jesus is the eternal and divine Son of God who fully reveals the character of God. He is the one through whom God the Father created the universe. He is the anointed Christ whom God promised would come to die for our sins and deliver both us and Israel into God’s kingdom. And he is the Light that is Life, the one who can defeat spiritual darkness and grant us not only physical life but also spiritual life with God.
 - That was all revealed in last week’s passage, the first eighteen verses of the gospel of John! What will we find out about Jesus today? Let’s pray and then we will get started.
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- † [Slide 2: 1.19-20] We are in the gospel of John, and we will begin today at 1.19, if you would like to turn there in your Bible. The past two weeks, we have worked through the apostle John’s introduction, which was very theological. Now, we begin the narrative. We will find John to be a theological writer, but now we will hear his story about Jesus and learn theology from what happens. We should be able to have fun with this!

John 1.19-20 [NASB]: This is the testimony of John [the Baptist], when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”

- † Recall that we have two Johns. The apostle John is writing our narrative; apostle simply means messenger, he is God’s messenger writing this gospel. John the Baptist is a prophet who was calling the nation to repentance, to return to their covenant relationship with God before the Christ was revealed. Priests and Levites come to question John the Baptist.
- † Priests were descendants of Moses’ brother Aaron, and at this time they governed the Temple and officiated at religious functions. Levites were from the tribe of Levi, but not descended

from Aaron. They were the helpers: they played music at religious functions, they provided security at the Temple, and they helped out in other practical ways to carry out the ministry of the Jewish religion.

- † [Slide 3: Jews] The apostle John says the *Jews* sent the priests and Levites, but really he means Jewish religious leaders. This is a common thing the apostle John does, to refer to the Jewish religious leaders simply as the Jews. Nobody knows why he does it.
 - Of course, all priests and Levites were religious leaders, but here the apostle John is referring to someone higher up, perhaps the ruling council of the Jewish religion at the time, what is called the Sanhedrin.
- † There is an interesting thing in the background here. John the Baptist's father was a priest, so John is a Levite and eligible to become a priest by heredity. No doubt this aspect of his identity is part of the reason the Jewish religious leaders wanted to find out what he thought he was doing, baptizing people in the Jordan River.
- † [Slide 4: who are you?] When these religious leaders confront John, they do so by asking "Who are *you*?" They know he is John, son of Zechariah the priest. What they are asking is, "Who are you that you may start your own ministry baptizing people in the Jordan River? What gives you the right to do this?"
- † John's response is interesting: he immediately tells them he is not the Christ, or Messiah, since these terms are synonyms. The Jews were hopeful that the much prophesied about Messiah would come to deliver God's people from oppression. So John adamantly tells them right off, he is not claiming to be the Messiah/Deliverer.
- † I think the fact that he answers with this denial indicates how much "chatter" was going on about the Messiah. They didn't have Facebook or Twitter, but there were several popular writings about the coming of the Messiah in that day, which many people thought were prophetic. There even had been some false Messiahs claiming to be God's Anointed One. So this was a point of social tension. The priests and the Levites want to know if John the Baptist is laying claim to this title, and he knows that, so he right up front tells them no.

[Slide 5: 1.21] John 1.21 [NASB]: **They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."**

- † Elijah was a prophet 800 years earlier, so why would they ask John the Baptist if he was Elijah? Elijah is one of the few people known to never have died! The Bible says in 2 Kings 2.11 that Elijah was whisked into Heaven right off the earth, without dying.
 - About half way between Elijah's day and John the Baptist's day, there was prophecy given by the Malachi [4.5-6] that Elijah would return to call the nation back into its covenant relationship with God.
 - This is what John the Baptist was doing at the Jordan River, calling for repentance, a return to right relationship with God. John denied being Elijah, but you should check out what this week's devotion says about this!

- † The next question is whether John the Baptist is “the Prophet,” not just any prophet, but “the Prophet.” This refers to a prophecy Moses gave in Deuteronomy [18.15] that God would send a prophet-leader like Moses, but even greater than Moses.
 - Again, I refer you to this week’s devotion, which contains some interesting things about this Prophet. For now, it is enough to note that John denies being this prophet too. He is not the Christ/Messiah, he is not Elijah, and he is not the Greater Moses Prophet.

[Slide 6: 1.22-24] John 1.22-24 [NASB]: Then they said to him, “Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am a voice of one crying [] in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the LORD,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.” Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

- † As I said earlier, the priests and the Levites have come to find out on what basis John thinks he has a right to be carrying out an independent, nonconformist, baptizing ministry in the Jordan River. They need to take an answer back to the religious leaders who sent them.
- † We have to pause here to talk a little bit about how John’s answer is translated. I freely confess that I am not as smart as the people who make all the various English translations. Whether you use the NASB, NIV, NKJV, or NLT, there are brilliant Greek and Hebrew scholars involved. I am not that smart, but there is something here that puzzles me.
- † **[Slide 7: Isaiah 40.3]** John the Baptist is quoting from Isaiah 40.3: “A voice cries out, ‘In the wilderness clear a way for the LORD; construct in the desert a road for our God.’” [NET]
 - The Greek text of John 1.23 could be translated: “I am a voice of one crying out, ‘In the wilderness, make straight the path of the Lord!’” I verified this with Dan Wallace, a renown Greek scholar and one of the translators of the NET.
 - But instead, all the English translations say, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”
 - Do you see the difference in the punctuation? Koine Greek, by the way, has no punctuation; there was no punctuation in the early Greek manuscripts, so this is always interpretive.
 - In Isaiah, the voice calls “clear the way in the wilderness,” but in John we usually translate that the voice is in the wilderness calling “clear the way.” I find it an interesting discrepancy.
 - Isaiah is part of a prophetic tradition of God returning from the wilderness to help Israel. In Isaiah, the symbolism is to make a straight path for God to come deliver his people, like people would construct processional paths for visiting dignitaries, like if we straightened up our rows of chairs and laid down a red carpet. The symbols point to people getting ready to honor God’s return: they should take comfort as they anticipate the promise and get themselves spiritually right with God.
- † **[Slide 8: Yahweh]** John the Baptist here identifies himself with this prophetic voice in Isaiah 40. Isaiah said there was a voice calling people to prepare for Yahweh – which is the

name God gave himself, which we render as LORD all in capitals – to prepare for Yahweh to come and rescue the people.

- So John the Baptist not only identifies himself here as the one who is calling out prophetically that the people must prepare for the Lord to come save them, he also thus identifies Jesus with Yahweh, the true God of Israel.
- Do you see that? John says he is the voice in Isaiah who is calling people to prepare for Yahweh... but he literally is at the Jordan River calling people to prepare for Christ, so he is affirming Christ as the Son of God, identified with the true God Yahweh.
- You will remember that over the last two weeks we have talked about how Jesus is the divine Son of God who came to earth and was born as a man. This is another pointer to that truth: John the Baptist says Yahweh, in the form of the Messiah, is coming, and that is why John himself is prophesying and carrying out his baptism ministry in the Jordan River. He is calling the nation to repent of their waywardness and return to their covenant relationship with God, so that they will be ready when the Messiah comes.

- † The devotion talks a little about v.24 and the Pharisees. We don't have time to go into them today, but one way or another, these fellows were connected to the Pharisees, one of the religious factions of the day. We'll learn more about the Pharisees later in the narrative.

[Slide 9: 1.25-28] John 1.25-28 [NASB]: They [the priests and Levites] asked him, and said to him, “Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them saying, “I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” These things took place in Bethany[,] beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

- † You notice that they don't ask John the Baptist what his baptism means, right? They know about baptism, but they want to know where he gets the authority to baptize. The only Jewish group known for baptism at this time, the Essenes, baptized themselves before entering into the community, but John was baptizing other Jews, implying he had the spiritual authority to do so.
- † So here again we see the real issue driving the priests and Levites: what gives John the Baptist the right to baptize people if he is not the coming Messiah or anyone else special? Apparently they either did not understand his reference to Isaiah 40 or – more likely since they would have been highly educated about the Old Testament – they rejected his claim.
- They would not have believed he was the Messiah, Elijah, or the Greater Moses Prophet, and they also did not believe he was the one preparing the way for the Messiah to come. They essentially are accusing him of wrong doing.
- † One reason the religious leaders were upset was because baptism was involved. We will talk more about baptism next week, but in this culture, non-Jews would get baptized – ritually cleansed, as it were – before coming into the Jewish faith. This was thought necessary, because non-Jews, called Gentiles, were thought to be defiled, dirty in a spiritual way.

- John the Baptist was baptizing not “dirty Gentiles,” but fellow Jews! He was saying *they* were defiled, that *they* needed to get right with God for the Messiah to come. This was upsetting to any Jew who thought he was good with God just by being born a Jew.
 - This would be especially troubling to the religious leaders who also thought that they were God’s men in charge of the religion. By saying the people were defiled with sin and needing to get right with God, John the Baptist also was implying that the religious leaders of his day were not shepherding the people to God effectively or properly.
- † [Slide 10: humility] John the Baptist answers them in a most unexpected way! How do you react when someone challenges your right to do something? We usually try to defend or justify ourselves.
- Instead of justifying his own importance and authority, John the Baptist calls himself so insignificant that he is not worthy of untying the sandal of the Messiah! This was considered one of the most menial tasks for a slave, so John the Baptist essentially told them that he could not assert his own authority to them, because he was lower than a slave when it came to the Messiah.
 - I wonder if we have the same view. It is counter cultural and counter to our fleshly instincts to diminish our own importance. Yet in all four gospels, John the Baptist always glorifies Christ and plays down his own importance. In all four gospels, John the Baptist always sacrifices his pride and his place for Christ, always places himself not only lower than a slave compared to Christ, but willing to act like a slave for Christ.
 - Are you willing to emulate this attitude? When you set your priorities for your time and money, how willing are you to sacrifice for Christ instead of satisfying your own ambitions or desires? When you interact with people in the church or out in the world, do you project arrogance or humility? an eagerness to serve yourself or Christ?
 - None of us is perfect in this. Let the Holy Spirit bring you a conviction to improve.
- † John the Baptist also told the priests and Levites that the Messiah/Christ was among them, but they did not know of him! That probably didn’t do much to dispel the tension!

[Slide 11: 1.29-31] John 1.29-31 [NASB]: **The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’ I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.”**

- † John the Baptist came baptizing in water so that the Messiah, the Christ, could be revealed, manifested, or I would translate “made known” to Israel. It was his belief that he was the one Isaiah had said would call people to repentance in order to receive the Messiah’s blessing.
- When John began this ministry, he didn’t know who the Messiah would be, just that God had told him the Messiah was coming. While John was baptizing and calling people to repentance – to return to their covenant relationship with God – he was teaching them about the Messiah, and – as we saw last week – this included teaching about the Messiah

being both human and eternally divine, that the Messiah always existed, so John the Baptist knew the Messiah was more important than himself.

- † We will see in the next verse how John discovered that his cousin, Jesus, was the Messiah. But here we have something happening in the present aspect of the story. The day after John the Baptist argued with the priests and Levites, he saw Jesus walking toward him, and he told his disciples: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
 - Some scholars see this “Lamb of God” as a reference to the Passover lamb in Exodus. The Passover Lamb was the sacrifice so that Israel’s sins could be forgiven, so that God could deliver them from Gentile oppression into the kingdom.
 - Other scholars recall Abraham’s faith that God would provide the sacrifice to save Isaac, even as he believed Isaac might be the Deliverer who had to die.
 - Still others point out that in Isaiah 53, Isaiah called the Messiah who would die for our sins “a lamb being led to slaughter.”
- † Maybe all these events foreshadowed the coming Messiah. What is clear is that Jesus is the one who came to take away the sin of the world. Jesus is the promised Messiah/Christ, he is the one God said would come.

[Slide 12: 1.32-34] John 1.32-34 [NASB]: John [the Baptist] testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He [the Spirit] remained upon Him [Jesus]. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water [that is, God the Father] said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

- † Notice, John the Baptist does indirectly tell us how he has authority to do what he is doing: God the Father sent him to do this work. The Apostle John had told us as much in his narration last week.
- † **[Slide 13: baptism]** Here John the Baptist explains how he knows Jesus is the Messiah. He is looking back. He admits that he did not realize that his cousin Jesus was the Messiah, but then he saw something God had told him to watch for. God had told him he would see the Holy Spirit descending and remaining on the Anointed One, the Messiah/Christ.
 - In Matthew 3.16 [ESV] we see this event: “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”
 - Please note that while some translations say the Spirit descended “as” a dove, that is the same as saying “like a dove.” The Spirit came down like a dove would, but the Spirit is not a bird!
 - So John here is remembering what he witnessed when Jesus was baptized by him in the Jordan River. John saw the Holy Spirit settle on Jesus, and this was the sign God had given him to see that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

- And John the Baptist states clearly here what has only been implied so far: that this Messiah, Jesus, is not only human, he is the divine Son of God.
- † [Slide 14: Isaiah 42.1] Again, this connects with a prophecy in Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus was born, that Israel's exile was due to the failure of the Davidic kings – that is the kings descending from David – and that the return from exile into independence from Gentile rule would be through the ultimate Davidic King, the “Servant of Yahweh,” who would come and be a substitute sacrifice for their sins.
- In 42.1, Isaiah said God would put his Spirit on this ultimate Davidic king so that he could establish justice and righteousness in God’s kingdom. When the Spirit descended on Jesus, it indicated that Jesus was this Davidic King, who would bring God’s righteousness and kingdom. It all ties together!
- † [Slide 15: 1.28] Back in v.28, the apostle John told us that this conversation was happening at Bethany beyond the Jordan. Nobody is sure where this is exactly, except that it was on east side of the Jordan River.
- Most scholars in the past have tried to find a village named Bethany on the river, where Jesus would have been baptized. But these conversations are happening after Jesus’ baptism. We know from the other gospel accounts that immediately after his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness alone. So this conversation is happening more than a month after Jesus’ baptism, and could be anywhere east of the river, not necessarily on the bank of the river.
 - Many scholars now believe that John had withdrawn from the river temporarily into an area known as Batanea, which might also have been known as Bethany, which in Greek is pronounced Βηθανία.
- † In any case, John the Baptist says Jesus baptizes in the Holy Spirit, instead of water. What does that mean? We will find out next week!

Conclusion

- † [Slide 16: summary] Like last week, we should take a minute to consider, “Who is Jesus?”
- Jesus is identified with Yahweh, the true God of Israel, in that he is the eternal Son of God [23, 30, 34]
 - Jesus is the Ultimate Davidic King who will deliver his people into God’s kingdom [32]
 - Jesus is the promised Messiah/Christ, God’s Anointed Deliverer [23]
 - Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [29]
 - Jesus is the one who can baptize in the Holy Spirit [33]
- † It is common when going through a study like this for people who thought they were Christians to suddenly realize that they are for the first time coming to true faith in Jesus.

- A pastor recently told me that one lady in his church realized she had not truly been a Christian, but was embarrassed to tell him, so she called some toll free hotline to accept the gospel.
 - It is my hope that some in this church, seeing this narrative come alive, will get past thinking they know already and will see Jesus is a new way that leads them to salvation.
- † Jesus is the Son of God, the ultimate king in the line of David, the promised Messiah/Christ, the lamb who can take away your sin because he paid your penalty on the cross, and the one who can baptize you in the Holy Spirit, which forever identifies you with him and assures your salvation. Jesus is everything you need, the only one you need.
- If you find your faith is growing or even that your faith is suddenly real, I hope you will let me know. There would be no embarrassment, rather there would be great cause to rejoice together!
- † John the Baptist offered a baptism of repentance, a chance to turn back to Yahweh in faith and to receive forgiveness. This was in preparation for the coming to Jerusalem of Jesus, who would offer deliverance in the form of a complete reconciliation with Yahweh. In this, Jesus is identified both with Yahweh as the divine bringer of blessing and with Isaiah's Suffering Servant who would sacrifice for our sins.
- John the Baptist calls through scripture to us too. If you have not put your faith in Jesus, then repent by doing so now. If you call yourself a Christian, then repent of your waywardness – your pride, your aloofness, of living for yourself or your leisure instead of for God and others – repent and return to your covenant relationship with God, so that you will be ready when the Messiah comes back.
 - You live under a better covenant than John the Baptist did, so rejoice in it and honor it, so you will experience the blessings associated with walking with Christ. Let's pray...