



# The Gospel of John

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 1:19–37

October 27, 2013

## Introduction

Having completed the prologue to his gospel, the apostle now returns to the first witness to Jesus’ deity: John the Baptist. We saw a glimpse of his ministry in verses 6–8, 15, but now the author gives us a fuller explanation of the message John brought.

When we consider the life of John the Baptist, there is not much that seems normal about him. The miraculous events surrounding Elizabeth’s pregnancy and John’s birth were a sure sign that this child was anything but ordinary. Those unusual circumstances recorded in Luke 1 come to a climax with John’s circumcision where his father Zacharias’s tongue became loosed and he began to speak in praise to God (v. 64). Since he had been mute for the duration of his wife’s pregnancy, it is no wonder that all who lived around them were filled with fear, wondering what sort of man this child would turn out to be (vv. 65–66). After those events, John faded into obscurity living in the desert for several years. This is when the word of God came to him, initiating his prophetic ministry at the age of 29 or 30 (Luke 1:80). He went about preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). Israel had been waiting for over 400 years for God to send them a prophet, so his ministry generated a great deal of interest. Large crowds came flocking to him from Jerusalem, Judea, and the entire district around the Jordan River (Matt 3:5).

As we examine these verses, you will notice that the events mentioned span three days. These occurred at the height of John’s ministry. On each day, John addressed a different group of people and emphasized a different truth about Jesus.

## **Day One: The Ministry of John the Baptist (vv. 19–28)**

Verse 19 contains the first of nearly 70 references to “the Jews” in this gospel, compared to 5 in Matthew, 6 in Mark, and 5 in Luke. In many of these uses, such as in verse 19, the term refers to the religious

authorities. In this sense it usually carries a negative connotation of those who are hostile to the gospel. However, on occasion it is used in either a neutral (e.g. 2:6) or positive sense (e.g. 4:22).

According to Deuteronomy 13:1–5 and 18:20–22 Israel was responsible to examine every prophet who came on the scene, to see whether or not he was of God. In the days of Jesus, this function was exercised by the Sanhedrin — the highest official body in Israel which had jurisdiction over internal affairs by permission of Rome.

Note: This function of examining prophets was *not* illegitimate at the time. The only problem was that they came to the wrong conclusion!

John's powerful preaching (including his scathing denunciation of the Jewish religious establishment), and widespread popularity had prompted the Jewish leaders to send a delegation to investigate him. The fact that some people were beginning to wonder if John was the Messiah further alarmed them. They feared an uprising which would be brutally suppressed by the Romans (cf. John 11:47–50), and which would diminish their power. So John not only unsettled them religiously, but politically as well. The delegation consisted of priests and Levites, at least some of whom were Pharisees. The priests were the spiritual intermediaries between God and the people, and officiated at religious ceremonies. The Levites assisted the priests in the temple rituals.

The first question posed to John reflects the Jewish leaders' confusion regarding him. "Who are you?" He did not fit any of their Messianic expectations. There was an implication in this question that John might be the Messiah — an implication which he emphatically denied by saying, "I am not the Christ." When the author gives this threefold declaration, "he confessed and did not deny, but confessed," this emphasized the vehemence of John the Baptist's denial. Unlike some of his followers, he understood his subordinate role as the forerunner of Christ.

But if John was not the Messiah, who was he? Could he possibly have been another significant figure associated with the end times? This prompted the next question, "Are you Elijah?" This is based on the prophecy of Malachi 3:1 and 4:5. The Jews expected Elijah himself to

return in bodily form just before the Messiah returned to establish his earthly kingdom. Even today, Jewish people leave an empty seat at the table for Elijah when they hold the Passover Seder. In many ways John's appearance was very similar to that of Elijah (Mark 1:6; cf. 2 Kings 1:8). Both of these men warned of coming judgment. But John's answer to the question of whether he was Elijah was again a denial, "I am not." John was not the literal Elijah who was taken up to heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). Yet there was a sense in which John filled an Elijah-like role as Jesus explained in Matthew 17:10–13. John was not actually Elijah like the Jews expected, but was instead one who came in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). He preached with the same boldness as Elijah and would have been the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy had the people believed Jesus' message and accepted Him as their Messiah.

The next question, "Are you the Prophet?" came from the prophecy of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15–18. Moses predicted that a prophet like him would come and speak the word of God. There was no consensus at the time as to the identity of the Prophet. Some believed that he, like Elijah, would also be a forerunner of the Messiah. Others saw him as the Messiah himself. From our perspective, we know the latter view to be correct since both Peter (Acts 3:22–23) and Stephen (Acts 7:37) applied Deuteronomy 18:15–18 to Jesus. Thus John denied being that Prophet by simply answering "no."

At this point, the delegation grew frustrated by this string of negative replies, and some of the exasperated members finally asked, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" John's reply was not what the delegation was expecting to hear. Rather than claiming to be someone important, he refers to himself simply as "a voice of one crying out in the wilderness." The language John used here is one of self-abasement. He viewed himself as not significant enough to even have a recognized name. However, for those who were spiritually astute, they would have recognized this phrase as a citation of Isaiah 40:3. That text speaks of the glory of the coming kingdom of God and the necessary preparation for it. But with this quotation, John had shifted the focus away from himself and onto Christ. His (and Isaiah's) message was to "make straight the way of the Lord." This was a challenge for the people and the leaders to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Messiah.

At this point, the author inserts a narrative comment, noting that the delegation had been sent from the Pharisees. This comment further clarifies who is meant by “the Jews” in verse 19. The majority party who controlled the Sanhedrin was the Sadducees, who were of the priestly class. But here we learn that the Pharisees had sent this delegation. Given the long-standing tensions between these two groups, it is unlikely that the Sadducees would have allowed the delegation to be composed entirely of their arch-rivals, the Pharisees. Furthermore, they had a stake in this inquiry because John came from a priestly family. But this statement likely indicates that the Pharisees prompted the inquiry and were included in the delegation.

In verse 25 we get to the real heart of what prompted this delegation. By what authority was John taking it upon himself to baptize? John’s baptism was not a Christian baptism, which was not instituted until after Christ’s resurrection. Nevertheless, baptism was not a foreign idea to the Jews. The Jews used the practice of baptism for proselytes — i.e. those Gentiles who converted to Judaism. But consider what this meant in their thinking: only Gentiles were baptized because they were the only ones who were “unclean.” Now John comes on the scene and is baptizing scores of Jews as a sign of their repentance. This shocked the Jewish leaders. They errantly thought that the Jews were already clean simply because of their lineage. This would become a major stumbling block not only during Jesus’ ministry but also later in the church age. John’s message and ministry was meant to evoke repentance in the hearts of the Jews. Even the Old Testament spoke of spiritual cleansing in connection with the Messiah’s coming (Ezek 36:25, 33; 37:23; Zech 13:1).

John’s reply to their question again deflects the attention away from the action of baptism and onto Christ. In verses 26–27, John again places himself in a place of humility. The phrase “but among you stands One whom you do not know” is another reference to Christ. At this moment, the crowds were unaware of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. Despite that lack of knowledge at the time, John knew that he was nothing in comparison with Christ. The duty of untying a master’s sandal was usually relegated to the lowliest slave during that time. John did not even consider himself worthy to perform that most menial and degrading of tasks — one that Jewish teachers were forbidden to demand of their students. But John’s statement is shocking when we consider Jesus’ appraisal of John as the greatest among the Old

Testament prophets (Matt 11:11).

Note: The location where John was baptizing is called “Bethany beyond the Jordan.” This is not the same town of Bethany where Jesus would visit with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha near Jerusalem. The exact location is unknown today. We only know that it was on the east side of the Jordan River. But the similar name has prompted some translators to incorrectly use the city name Bethabara (KJV, NKJV). However, having multiple cities with the same name in the same region was not uncommon at the time (e.g. Antioch, Caesarea).

### **Day Two: The Ministry of Jesus (vv. 29–34)**

The phrase “next day” indicates a sequence of days which continues in verses 35, 43, and 2:1. The events which began with John’s interview by the delegation from Jerusalem to the miracle at Cana (2:1–11) spanned one week. The day after John spoke to the delegation, he saw Jesus coming toward him. He announced Jesus to be the Lamb of God. We are not told specifically who John is addressing here, but it was presumably the general crowd that frequently gathered to hear John preach.

The title “Lamb of God” is one that only appears in John’s writings. It is the first of a whole series of titles given to Jesus in this chapter. The others include Rabbi (vv. 28, 49), Messiah (v. 41), Son of God (vv. 39, 49), King of Israel (v. 49), Son of Man (v. 51), and Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph (v. 45). The concept of a sacrificial lamb was a familiar one for the Jewish people. One of the constants throughout Israel’s history was the fact that the separation from God and His promises could only be removed by blood sacrifices. They knew that God provided a lamb to offer in place of Isaac (Gen 22:7–8). Lambs were sacrificed at Passover (Exod 12:1–36; Mark 14:12), in the daily temple sacrifices (Exod 29:38–42), and as a sin offering for individuals (Lev 5:5–7). They were also aware that Isaiah’s prophecy likened the Messiah to “a lamb that is led to slaughter” (Isa 53:7; cf. Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19). This title foreshadows Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice on the cross for the sin of the world. The term world, from the Greek *kosmos* (κόσμος) has a variety of meanings in the New Testament. In this case it refers to humanity in general. It is a reference to all people without distinction, transcending all national, racial, and ethnic boundaries. When John pairs the term “sin” with the term “world,” this indicates

that sin is a world-wide problem. Jesus' sacrifice is also sufficient for all people without exception (cf. 1 John 2:2). But though His sacrificial death is sufficient for the sins of everyone (cf. John 3:16; 4:42; 6:51; 1 Tim 2:6; Heb 2:9; 1 John 4:14), it is only efficacious for those who savingly believe in Him (John 3:15–16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:40; 11:25–26; 20:31; Luke 8:12; Acts 10:43; 13:39; 16:31; Rom 1:16; 3:21–24; 4:3–5; 10:9–10; 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 3:6–9, 22; Eph 1:13; 1 John 5:1, 10–13). This verse does not teach universalism — the false doctrine that everyone will be saved. This plain fact is obvious from the Bible's teachings that most people will suffer eternal punishment in hell (Matt 25:41, 46; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev 14:9–11; 20:11–15; cf. Ezek 18:4, 20; Luke 13:23–24; John 8:24), while only a few will be saved (Matt 7:13–14).

In verses 30–31, John again draws attention to the fact that he is of low estate in comparison with Christ. We already looked at the fact of Jesus' priority of rank as One who was the preexistent God long before John was even conceived (see notes on John 1:6–13). John's statement in verse 31 again reveals his role as the forerunner of Christ. We shouldn't take this to mean that Jesus was baptized at this time. Verses 32–33 reveal that John did not know Jesus as the Messiah prior to His baptism. Whether or not John the Baptist personally knew his cousin Jesus prior to this time is irrelevant. The coming of the Spirit on Jesus was His anointing as the rightful Davidic King (Isa 11:1). This is known as the *theocratic anointing*. We also know that the Servant of the Lord (Isa 42:1) would have a special anointing of the Spirit. This theocratic anointing would "remain" (v. 33) on Jesus, unlike David's predecessor, King Saul (1 Sam 16:13–14).

### The Theocratic Anointing

The theocratic anointing involves a unique pouring out God's Spirit upon Israel's human ruler, which specially enabled him to lead the nation both administratively and militarily. Israel was a theocracy — a nation set up with God as its King, and various human rulers to mediate the affairs between God and the people. As in other areas of the theocracy, this unique relationship with the Spirit involved direct access to God and the immediate presence of the Holy Spirit, if the occasion required. It was not a permanent ministry as with the Holy Spirit's indwelling of believers. Rather, this anointing could be taken away just as easily as it was given, as was the case with King Saul (1 Sam 16:14). Although it can be prominently seen in the line of Davidic kings, it began much earlier with the ministry of

Moses. In the end, this anointing ultimately comes to rest on Israel's final human ruler: Jesus Christ.

John also declared that Jesus is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. This is what took place on the day of Pentecost at the birth of the church — an event Jesus promised would take place in Acts 1:5. John the Baptist concludes his witness to Jesus by testifying that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 34). “Son” is the author's favorite designation for Jesus in this gospel and clearly emphasizes His deity and unique relationship to the Father (cf. 1:18). A number of Old Testament passages link the title “Son of God” with the Messiah (1 Sam 26:17, 21, 25; 2 Sam 7:14; Psalm 2:7).

### **Day Three: Following Jesus (vv. 35–37)**

The third day begins in verse 35 and continues the sequence which began in verse 29. This group is the smallest one consisting of only two of John the Baptist's disciples — Andrew (v. 40) and John. Upon hearing again John's declaration that Jesus is the Lamb of God, these two disciples went and followed Jesus. Even though they would later become Jesus' permanent disciples, they didn't follow Him on a permanent basis at this time. But their response to John's declaration flows logically from the first two. Jesus is greater than John. Jesus is the Son of God. Therefore, these disciples followed Him! Having served his purpose as a witness to the true identity of Jesus, John the Baptist now fades from the scene. The rest of the gospel focuses on the ministry of Jesus — something John the Baptist himself would have approved of.

### **Conclusion**

John would later declare:

“A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.” ~John 3:27–30

How will you respond to Jesus? Will we put Him in first place in our lives and allow His gospel to govern our lives? Will we recognize the truth

that Jesus is the Son of God and turn from all other things to follow Him? John is suggesting we do just that!

~AWB