



“BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD”

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John 1:19-34

Third Message

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Sometimes we hear a voice. It is not the voice of the weather forecaster, the sports broadcaster, or the political prognosticator. This voice is different. We hear it while we are hiking in the mountains, strolling the busy city streets, when we are alone or in a crowd. The voice grabs our attention. It takes our thoughts from the earthly to the heavenly. We realize that the voice is important, and we need to listen. It is saying something about God. It is the wilderness voice, the voice of the Baptizer.

The next section of the gospel of John centers on a series of days (1:29, 35, 39, 43; 2:1). Depending on how they are counted, either six or seven days are mentioned in John 1:19-2:11. The apostle began his prologue with the theme of creation, and that theme is continued here with a new creation week. It culminates when Jesus turns water into wine and redefines the end-time expectations of the people of God. In the new creation week we see the witness of John, of the disciples, and of Jesus himself. Today our focus will be on John the Baptist.

The first mention of John comes in the prologue: “He was not the light, but he came to testify about the Light” (1:8). Each of the four gospel writers makes mention of John’s life and ministry. So well known is this key figure that the apostle John has only to mention his name and everyone knows who he is talking about.

John’s testimony begins in 1:19:

This is the testimony of John, 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.” They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” 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. They 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. (John 1:19-28 NASB)

In our study today we will consider the group of people who approached John, the delegation, and then the two individuals mentioned in the text, John the Baptist and Jesus.

John was baptizing at Bethany, beyond the Jordan, when these people approached him. The Bethany that is most commonly mentioned in the gospels lies a short distance from Jerusalem, east and slightly south on the Jericho road. It was the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. However, this Bethany is beyond the Jordan. Since place names were fluid in those days, the most plausible explanation is that this was Batanea, Bashan in the O.T, which was not a town or village but an area in the north-east of the country, near Galilee, on the other side of the Jordan.

John, who was an artist, may be using the name Bethany to make a point. His account begins at Bethany. At the end of Jesus’ public ministry, recorded in chapter 10, the Lord retreats to this same place. In chapter 11, Jesus performs his greatest sign, the raising of Lazarus, at Bethany. Thus Bethany frames the story of Jesus’ public ministry. What began as public witness in the north ends in public crucifixion in the south.

Several groups are mentioned in connection with this delegation. First, it is sent from Jerusalem by the Jews. The expression “the Jews” is used in various ways in this gospel, but usually it refers to the Jewish leaders, especially those of Jerusalem and Judea. They were in opposition to Jesus. They failed to understand him and sought to kill him. It’s likely that the Jews of Jerusalem were the leaders of the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious court of the Jews. This group was dominated by the Sadducees, who were the wealthy aristocracy, as opposed to the more blue-collar Pharisees.

Within the delegation were the priests and the Levites. The chief priests controlled the office of high priest and other temple offices. Holders of political and economic power, these men were also part of the wealthy aristocracy. The priests, the main teachers of the law, who were lower on the economic ladder, did not live in Jerusalem.

The Levites belonged to the tribe of Levi. They were not descended from Aaron, and so could not be priests. In Jesus’ day they assisted in temple worship and served as the temple police. John the Baptist was a Le-

vite and the son of a priest. Most of the priests and Levites belonged to the party of the Sadducees.

The Pharisees also would appear to be a part of the delegation. It's unlikely that there would have been two groups. If the Sanhedrin did send a delegation, the group probably would have included some Pharisees, because they had influence in the Sanhedrin. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees enjoyed great public support. Their emphasis was on purity, not politics; while the Sadducees were more focused on gaining power in the temporal world.

This delegation came to John because he was making quite a stir and getting a lot of attention. This was a time of great messianic expectations. Every year during Passover, the Romans sent soldiers to Jerusalem. Stationed in the Antonia Fortress, just next to the temple, they could control any potential Jewish uprising, because the Jews believed that when the Messiah came, the Romans would be overthrown. So the Jewish leaders, the ecclesiastical police, were very interested in John and what he was doing.

Often it is religious leadership that forms the major obstacle to the gospel and to Jesus. This is what we will see over and over in John's gospel. Some church leaders are more known for their policing abilities than their love for Jesus. They think that their job is to keep things under control, and the congregation agrees with them. They question any suspicious or unacceptable behavior. It's not behavior that is sinful, but anything they deem unacceptable that concerns them. They feel it is their duty to tell people what they are doing wrong. Their motto is, "We've always done it this way." They don't want to lose their political advantage or station in society. So when the Spirit does something new, they not only fail to embrace it, they try to quash it.

In 1976, I was a young, newly married man, living on the campus of the University of Nebraska. I met several young men and women living in fraternities and sororities who wanted to meet for Bible study. I offered to lead the study, and we met in the basement of a Methodist church. After a few weeks the study attracted several students who were not connected with any other campus group. One day I had a visit from a convoy of leaders from an established campus ministry. The chief priest didn't come, but he sent everyone else. My wife and I were outnumbered. They questioned me about what I was doing. They informed me that the campus was their territory, even though the students that I was meeting with had no connection with their group. They tried to persuade us to meet less than once a week. I was absolutely amazed that one person on a campus of 20,000 students could receive that much attention. Now I admit I was young and I didn't fully know what I was doing. But I was just being available to the leading of the Spirit. I had no agenda and I was not a threat. I often think about that time with great sorrow. I wonder how many students were prevented from coming to

Christ or growing in Christ because of that high-control, watchdog mentality.

This is what was happening with John the Baptist, and it can happen in any church. The Spirit of God is always breaking out in new directions. We need to be ready and open to his leading. Let us not stifle, but embrace, encourage and nurture these movements that are consistent with God's word. I pray that we will always be open to what the Spirit is doing in our midst here at PBCC.

John is bombarded with questions by the delegation. In his responses we learn more about who he is not rather than who he is. First, who John is not. He says that he is not the Christ. This verb meaning "to anoint" is equivalent to the Hebrew term Messiah. John denies this identity emphatically and directly. Leaving no doubt, his denial is part of his witness to the true Christ. Asked whether or not he is Elijah, he also responds in the negative. This is a reference to Malachi 4:5, the promise that God would send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.

The interesting thing here is that Jesus did identify John with Elijah. However, there is no reference to indicate that John ever made that connection. Apparently he did not see himself in that light. If he did, he was not going to make that proclamation about himself. Like John, at times we don't understand the significance of what we are involved in. We can have a different estimation of ourselves than God does.

John also denies that he is the "Prophet." This is a reference to Deut. 18, and the expectation that a prophet like Moses would come before the promised Messiah. Moses said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him" (Deut 18:15).

The delegation is getting nothing out of John except denials. But they need something. They can't return to Jerusalem empty-handed. So they ask, "What do you say about yourself?" And so John replies with the familiar quotation from Isaiah 40:3: "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.'" In the context of Isaiah, the prophet was calling for a straightening of curves and leveling of hills to build a road for the exiles returning from Babylon. Isaiah 40-66 begins by announcing good news and anticipating a greater redemption by the Suffering Servant. Now John applies that voice to himself, saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of this greater redemption.

Finally, the Pharisees question John about why he was baptizing if he was not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet. The question implies that the delegation is seeking to know by what authority John is baptizing. Baptism was not unknown in that day. Proselytes were baptized, and in the monastic community of Qumran, members underwent a daily baptism. The difference was that these baptisms were self-administered, while John's baptism was an end-time rite administered by an

end-time figure with great authority. And John was not baptizing proselytes, but Jews.

John doesn't really answer the questions about his identity or authority. He is indicating that the delegation will not discover what they seek to know with their questions. Instead, he points them to the real issue, which is Jesus. To John, his own identity is unimportant. He will say more about baptism, but for now he bears witness to Jesus' superiority, the person the Jews do not know but need to know. John regards himself as so insignificant he feels unworthy to untie Jesus' sandal. This is a tremendous statement of humility. In those days, a student would serve his teacher as a slave would his master. The only difference was that a student would not take off his teacher's shoes. But John is saying that he is unworthy to do even this.

The most important thing about our life and witness is removing the spotlight from ourselves and putting it on Jesus. The message, not the messenger, is what's important. It is not our own recognition or place of honor but the health and the growth of others in Jesus that's primary. Our task is to simply be a voice. Our ministry, our gifts, our being used by God is not meant for our significance or identity. John recognized that his role was to simply point people to Jesus. He knew that he must decrease so that Jesus would increase. What a model of humility for us to follow! We must strive to be "assist leaders," not high scorers. People should not be drawn to us, but to the Jesus in us. We can only pray that we would be as single-minded as John in pointing people to Jesus, that, rather than being jealous of others, we would delight in people being raised up around us to be used by God.

In this regard, Ray Stedman, the original pastor at PBC, was a wonderful model. Ray was an incredibly gifted man of God. People came from far and wide to hear him speak. Yet he was always giving opportunity to younger men to preach. He delighted in seeing God raise up preachers and teachers of the Word. Most of the people in our leadership today are beneficiaries of Ray's John-like humility. Hopefully, we can follow his example for the next generation.

Finally, we come to what John said about Jesus.

The next day he 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 testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water 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." (John 1:29-34)

John says four things about Jesus. First, Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." I'm not sure what John was thinking when he said this. When we see the words "Lamb of God," we immediately think of the sacrificial or Passover lamb. But that would not have been the common understanding of that day for this term. John may be making the connection to Isaiah 53:7, a book he has already referred to:

**He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. (Isa 53:7)**

Or John the Baptist may have been making a reference to an apocalyptic lamb mentioned in several Jewish texts. This was a warrior lamb, a term used for the Messiah who would deliver God's people. This lamb would purge the land and clean up the mess, and thus take away sin. John probably spoke better than even he knew. Later, when he was in prison, he sent to Jesus to ask him if he was the Christ, because Jesus was not doing what John thought he would do. We too can speak better than we know. Even before I became a Christian I would defend my Christian friend to others and boldly share the claims of Christ. Of course we understand this phrase in a much deeper way today. Indeed Jesus was led to the cross as an innocent lamb to slaughter. He was the sacrifice that paid for our sins in full and allowed us to have a relationship with God.

The second confession that John makes is again a statement about the superiority of Jesus: "He existed before me." The writer made the same point in verse 15 of the prologue. We must take our focus off ourselves and put it on Jesus, the pre-existent one, because he is superior in time and importance.

John's third statement is that Jesus is the Spirit-baptizer. This incident in John's gospel occurred after John had baptized Jesus. Up until that point, John did not "know" Jesus, even though they were related. John was able to identify Jesus because when he baptized him, the Spirit descended on him as a dove and remained on him. This is John's testimony or witness.

The Spirit is identified with the Davidic king and the Servant of the Lord in a number of passages in Isaiah:

**Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and strength,
The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
(Isa 11:1-2)**

**The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
Because the LORD has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners. (Isa 61:1)**

John makes it clear that the Spirit remained on Jesus. In the O.T., the Spirit temporarily came upon Saul and Samson and others for a specific purpose, for a specific time. What is different this time is that the Spirit came to reside permanently with a human being. Because Jesus had the Spirit, he could now pour out that Spirit on those who would believe in him.

Finally, John gives testimony to Jesus as the Son of God. An interesting variant reading in some manuscripts identifies him as being "the Chosen One of God" instead of Son of God. "Son of God" is a common phrase in John, while "Chosen One" is not. Perhaps the scribes changed this text to the more common phrase, especially if they wanted to avoid the "Chosen One" being construed as adoptionism. If "Chosen One" is the correct reading, then this verse would point to another passage in Isaiah, and Jesus' connection to the Spirit:

**"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him." (Isa 42:1)**

John's testimony declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the pre-existent one, the Spirit-baptizer, the Son or Chosen One of God. Is this the Jesus we know? This is the Jesus I need. I love Jesus the teacher, Jesus the discipler, Jesus the compassionate one. But what I really need is the Lamb of God who takes away my sin, because my garments are blood-red from its stains. I need to stop being consumed with myself and put the focus on Jesus, who is superior to me in every way. I need the one who baptizes in the Spirit because I am absolutely helpless without the life and the resources that the Spir-

it gives. What I need is God's Son, because the Son is the only one who can show me the Father and take me to him.

Many see Jesus as a great example, an affirmation of moral values or of the undying human spirit. But that is not the Jesus we see here. The Jews did not know Jesus. We need to be clear on the Jesus we know. And then we need to be clear about the Jesus we share with others. Jesus is not just for the church, he is for the world. Being a witness is the most important thing that John did, and being a witness might be the most important work we do. Our lives have meaning because they are a testimony. We can't answer all the questions that people ask, nor do we need to. People won't get what they want even if we could answer them. What John does and what we need to do is to unmask the real issues and direct people to the Lamb of God who takes away their sin, and to the Spirit-baptizer who can give them life. Frederick Beuchner said: "A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands. The way he carries his cross. The way he carries me.'"¹

"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

1. Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973), 36-37.

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