
John 1:19-34 *John the Baptist!*

Into Thy Word Ministries Bible Study www.intothyword.org

General Idea: John the Baptist is ministering near Bethany by the Jordan River, as he gives his mission and testimony to a group of religious leaders and their representatives. They were perplexed about him; was he the long awaited Messiah or some kind of Prophet or a second coming of Elijah? *Who is this guy?* They needed to know. John's answer was equally perplexing, as he stated he was not the Messiah, as he quoted Isaiah saying: *I am a mere voice proclaiming from the wilderness, prepare the straight and correct way of the LORD.* Then they confronted John about his baptizing, and he replied saying, *I merely baptize with water, he who comes will baptize with fire, and I am not worthy to even be His slave.*

After that, the talked-about One came; Jesus had finally arrived! John saw Him and proclaimed, *Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! He is the One I was talking about, He is the One of whom I said, "soon One who is far greater than I will come, for He existed long before I, and I baptize to point to Him and show my people Israel—here He is."* Then the Holy Spirit descended ever so tenderly like the gentleness of a dove coming from heaven and resting on Jesus. John proclaimed, *He is the One to whom we are all looking and need; He is the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and I testify that Jesus is the Son of God!*

Contexts and Background:

The purpose of John's ministry and baptism was one of preparation and repentance to prepare for Christ, to make us aware of our sin and need for a Savior. This was a very public event because our faith needs to be public and pronounced—a continual living event. Our Lord identified Himself and calls us to be identified in Him. The context is also about being loyal to God so that we cling to Him with faith and obedience.

Commentary—Word and Phrase Meanings:

- *John's testimony.* This was not just his statement of facts, but his purpose and mission in life, to prepare the people for the coming Messiah. It was a message of hope and of the necessity to prepare one's self by repenting, by turning away from what holds us back from God, such as sin, selfishness, pride... The question to us is *how are we prepared to meet and receive Him, to live out our lives for Him?*
- *Priests and Levites.* This refers to the general groupings of religious leaders who often did not agree or cooperate as is also true today. In addition, these are the groups who first opposed Christ and then the new Christians. They came to investigate because John was gaining many followers and stirring up Herod's curiosity.
- *The Christ.* Meaning the Messiah. John did not want to draw attention to or even talk about himself. Rather, his mission was to point to Jesus.
- *Are you Elijah?* Elijah was considered one of the greatest and most powerful Prophets, who did not die but was taken up to heaven in a chariot. It was the popular thinking then (not biblical) that God used Elijah to run His errands on earth and debate and resolve rabbinic disputes. Malachi 4 foretells the Messiah: *See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.* Thus, many people in the first century actually expected Elijah to personally come to either be the Messiah or introduce him. But, the Malachi passage did not mean that Elijah would personally show up; rather, it was his position as a forerunner and Prophet who declared warning of the need to repent. John came in that spirit and power, but he was not Elijah (Mal. 4:1-5; Matt. 11:1-19; Luke 1:17)
- *Are you the Prophet?* In Deuteronomy there is a prediction that was very popular then: *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers.* Besides Elijah coming back, there were many predictions and theories and expectations of who the Messiah might be (including another Moses), and when he would come, just as there are today with end-time scenarios.

Because, just as today, people did not look to the Word for answers, but rather their own inclinations. So John had to dispel these rumors and myths before he could show them the actual Christ (Ex. 23:20; Deut. 18:15-18; Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40; Matt. 3:3; John 1:45; 7:40-41).

- *Who are you?* The Jewish leaders believed that if you did not go to the right school or were not in the right position, you had no right to baptize. Yet, there was a curiosity amongst the religious leaders and people; *who was this guy?* However, this was perhaps a means to trap him so they could silence his message.
- *What do you say about yourself?* As an application, this can be turned around and said of us. *Who am I? What do I want? Do these things align up to Christ and His Message?*
- *I am the voice.* This is the Greek word for spokesperson—"phone", from which we get our word, "telephone." This is a quote from Isaiah 40:3 used as a warning, a pronouncement for repentance, and containing the promise of God for fullness and salvation. This also means to be a herald of a new exodus—not to a promised land, but rather a promise of God that is now being fulfilled—an exodus out of the wilderness of sin and ritual and into the redemption of Christ and the Kingdom of God (Isa. 6:6-9; 40:3; Matt. 3:3-4; Luke 1:76, 3:4;).
- *Make straight the way.* Means to remove all obstructions. We must be prepared mentally and spiritually and remove the barriers that prevent us from seeing and moving ahead to where we need to be for God's glory and our betterment (Isa. 6:4; 35:8-10; 40:1-8; 57:14; 62:10; Mark 1:1-3; Luke 3:3-9).
- *Pharisees.* They were a sect in Judaism whose job centered on interpreting the law (they were not fair-you-see). Josephus, a first century historian, recorded that there were more than 6,000 Pharisees then. They are famous for creating the Jewish commentary the *Talmud*, which includes the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara* (200 BC- 500 AD+), a thorough Jewish history and study of the Law, Prophets, and Writings. Also, according to Josephus, who was from a Jewish background, many of the Pharisees were good and godly, but they overemphasized outward appearances. They were disliked by more pious groups because they repeated bad practices formed from bad ideas—those without merit, thought, or Scriptural guidance. They made their own traditions and manipulated others to obey them, thus missing what God had actually intended. Later on, we will see that Jesus did not play their game of pretentiousness (looking good with their decorative garments and long public prayers, then going out, lying, and cheating widows and orphans), and they hated Him for it. An honest man is fervently hated by Hypocrites (Matt. 23)!
- *I baptize with water.* This was a ceremonial cleansing or washing ritual to show publicly a commitment to follow God and remove the pride and pagan obstacles that prevented one from serving with obedience. The *Qumran* community and other first-century pious Jewish groups practiced this. This was also a ceremony one went through to join a pious group that held to the covenant that God gave Israel. Converted gentiles were baptized to join the Jewish community. Some Greek philosophers also practiced this, like *Epictetus* (Deut 6:4; Matt. 3:6; John 3:3-5; 4:7-26).
- *Whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.* The job of a servant was to carry his master's sandals that were culturally considered disgusting and untouchable (considering they walked in mud and dung...). Here John says he is not worthy to even be His slave—an act of humility and the awareness of the Holiness of God. This is also to make an important distinction that anyone who comes after another is the prior person's disciple and lesser. Jesus was not John's disciple; rather John was being a harbinger of the Good News of the Gospel (2 Kings 18:12; 19:34; 20:06; Jer. 35:15; 44:4).
- *Bethany /Bethabara.* This was in Herod's region, where John the Baptist was then captured and taken to *Machaerus*, Herod's fort and prison. John was later executed by the trickery of Herod's brother's wife Herodias because he told them they were living in sin. *Bethabara*, found in the KJV and other versions, comes from a spelling error found in some later manuscripts. Bethany is correct; the confusion was that the early church leaders could not find that city because by the second century, it no longer existed (Matt. 14:1-12).

- *The Lamb of God.* This is a metaphor to the Passover Lamb that was sacrificed and prepared when the Angel of death passed over Egypt. The Angel did not kill the Israelites because they followed God's instructions through Moses to put some of the blood on their doorposts, so the Angel "passed-over." Here, Christ is the sacrifice of blood, the offering for us to be forgiven of our sins. He represents the only effective and ultimate sacrifice; He takes away the sin of the world. The sacrificial animal of the Passover in the Old Testament foreshadowed what Christ would and has done for us. The price was invaluable and could not have been paid by human measures. This is also an image of Christ Who comes as a suffering servant and then becomes the Sacrifice to atone for our sins (Ex. 12; Lev. 16; Isa. 53:7-12; John 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet 1:19).
- *Takes away the sin.* John's baptism does not remove sin, nor does any baptism. Rather, it shows one has repented and thus God has forgiven him. Christ is now the One who forgives (Jer. 31:34)!
- *Of the world.* This refers to humanity who is hostile to God, but not universal salvation. Christ gives us the means and empowerment to be forgiven, but we must receive it and repent of our sins (John 3:16).
- *Did not know him.* This was a Jewish retort and a form of irony, meaning *you do not know something you should know*. John was Jesus' cousin and they were probably very close growing up. This did not mean he did not know who He was or did not have a relationship with Him; rather, Christ can only be identified by the Holy Spirit's unveiling Him to us. Here, publicly and in our salvation, the Holy Spirit proceeds our accepting of Christ as Savior (Luke 1:36-45).
- *Spirit come down from heaven as a dove.* The meekness of God's power—ultimate power under ultimate control that is shown as gentle (Isa. 11:2; Mark 1:10).
- *Baptize with the Holy Spirit.* This refers also to the baptisms we have done since then and today that signify one's faith and commitment as a profession of faith. Real biblical baptism was never intended to be a just a ritual; rather, it was meant to signify one's new birth in Christ. We have been cleansed, our pious commitment is our response; thus mode and means are not important; rather, sincerity of faith is (Luke 11:13; John 3: 3-6; 14: 16, 26; 16:7; Acts 1:5-8; 2:1-3; 19:1-2; Rom. 8:26-27; 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 12:3,13; 15:45; Gal. 5:13-26; Eph. 3:17; 1 John 2:1; Rev. 3:20).
- *Spirit...remain.* This is a proclamation that the Messianic era had come. For the Jews, this was a fulfillment of prophecy that the Holy Spirit will be poured out to all who believe. Prior to this, the Holy Spirit only came and went; now, He stays to show us the Lord and empower us for service.
- *Son of God.* A bold proclamation of who Jesus Christ, the eternal God is—effectually and real, and that he has finished His work as Messiah and as our High Priest by means of His suffering, atonement, and resurrection. This saying is often defined by the Church as a title for Jesus' humanity and divinity on how He identified with us and paid for our sins. Jesus is God's Son; yet, He is God, and He is distinguished from the Father—One God, two distinctions or Persons, *three* including the Holy Spirit—the Trinity. The end result is that through Christ we have redemption, life, and purpose. Christ is the eternal Son and He has always been the Son of God and we His children (2 Sam. 7:13-14; Psalm 2:7; Matt. 3:17; 11:11-14; Mark 15:39; John 1:12; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 4:14-16; 1 John 1:7; 4:15; 5:5).

Devotional Thoughts and Applications:

This passage is a picture of the character of Jesus, His humility, coming sacrifice, and His public vocation to be the sin-taker and bearer. He is like the Lamb who is brought to the altar into the presence of God; it is slaughtered, then sacrificed to appease God's just wrath for sin so He can dispense His temporary grace. The lamb's blood gives the sinner atonement, a temporary pass of grace, a covering to hide one's heinous sin before a just and Holy God. Here, Jesus comes as that ultimate continual Lamb, as the suffering servant who reveals to us the Holy Spirit and the love and gentleness of God. He comes to us as the God of Truth who loves and cares, and gives us his everlasting undeserved and unmerited grace. He is the Lamb of God who comes to bear our sins, to take them upon himself, unburdening us and burdening Himself, and in so doing, taking our sins away. Then His blood will be shed for us, poured out for us, and His body will be broken for us as He covers us with His righteousness, giving us fullness

and effectual life. He is the God who cares and who loves, in whom we can rely, put our faith in, and trust with everything (John 4:42)!

The question is, if we trust in Christ, if we understand His character, how will we live? Are we living as we believe? If not, why not? Make a commitment to remove all obstructions!

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. Have you ever had to give your testimony to a group of people? How did you feel?
2. What do you think is your mission in life—your purpose, your reason for being? How would you explain it to someone who does not understand?
3. When you became a Christian, did you feel that you were prepared to meet and receive Him, to live out your life for Him?
4. Who is this Jesus to you? What does He mean to you and to your daily life? What would make you hunger to know more? Why was John's answer so perplexing to the religious leaders?
5. What does the Lamb of God mean to you? What does it mean to you that He takes away your sins?
6. How would you explain the purpose of John's ministry and baptism? What did you do to repent and prepare for Christ? What do you need to do?
7. Why is baptism a public event? How has your faith been public and/or pronounced? What do you need to do to make your faith a continual, living event?
8. How have you been identified in Christ? What does that mean to you? How does being loyal to God help you cling to Him with faith and obedience?
9. How does humility help us see and be aware of the Holiness of God? Because of Christ, what will we do now, *how then shall we live?*
10. How does it make you feel that Jesus Christ is the God who is there, who cares, who loves, and on/in whom we can rely, put our faith, and trust with everything?
11. This passage asks, *what do you say about yourself?* Or, otherwise said, *who am I and what do I want?* So, do these things align with Christ and His Message? If not, what are the obstacles and what can you do to remove them?
12. Do you consider yourself to be a pointer or spokesperson regarding Jesus? If not, why not, and what could you do to become one (not becoming a pastor or evangelist unless this is your call); how can Christ use you where you are? What would that mean and what would you have to do?