

## Gospel of John

### Lesson 3

#### **Review**

In John 1:1-18, John claims that Jesus has always been with God and is God, and that Jesus gives all those who believe his claims the right to become children of God. John associates Jesus with the word, life, and light, and contends that Jesus provides a new and superior revelation of grace and truth.

#### **John 1:19-28 More on John the Baptist**

##### **Background on John the Baptist**

Conservative scholars generally view Malachi as the last OT prophet and estimate that his book was written around 430 B.C. As subsequent centuries passed without additional writings from someone generally recognized as a prophet, multiple factions with different expectations concerning God and history emerged among Jews. The events described in John's gospel occur circa A.D. 30, when the pagan Roman Empire ruled Palestine through various local rulers and bureaucrats. The gospels and historical sources portray a wide spectrum of religious attitudes among Palestinian Jews.

Some Jews maintained that the OT was true and hoped for the fulfillment of all its prophecies. How that fulfillment would occur and what it would look like was a topic of great debate. One common element was the appearance of the Messiah at the end of the age, an heir of David supernaturally empowered to establish Israel as the supreme kingdom on earth, and to destroy or punish those who did not submit to his authority, especially foreign oppressors. (See 2 Sam. 7:10-16.) Some of this group expected the Messiah to root out false or unfaithful Israelites. Some expected Elijah to reappear as a sign those times were beginning. (Mal. 4:5-6.) Some expected an unnamed prophet ("the Prophet") predicted by Moses to appear as a religious leader during that time. (Deut. 18:17-19.) Some expected an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on many people would occur leading to great righteousness and repentance. (Joel 2:28-32; Eze. 36:24-32; 37:14.) Like end times discussions today, there was no consensus among faithful Jews as to how these prophetic puzzle pieces fit together.

On the other end of the spectrum, after 400+ years with no recognized prophet, the gospels portray other Jews as quite cynical. Some, like tax collectors and Herodians, cooperated with the Romans in the pursuit of individual wealth and power. Some, like many members of the families that controlled the temple, still observed the OT law, regulations, and festivals, but their goals appear to be the maintenance of social status and wealth, and their methods relied on political intrigue rather than any expectation that God would supernaturally assist the faithful.

These groups were aware of each other. The Dead Sea scrolls suggests that some conservative Jews viewed the people controlling the temple as corrupt and hoped the end times would come soon and include a thorough house cleaning. Conversely, the cynical crowd would have been delighted to get rid of the Romans, but did not want to jeopardize the status quo based on some harebrained scheme. They knew Messianic rumors could lead to political agitation and would have been wary of them.

The gospels all portray John the Baptist's ministry as a huge cultural event. They agree he called Israelites to repent from sinful behaviors, turn to God, and live consistently with their professed faith. (Matt. 3:1-12; Mark 1:2-8; Luke 2:3-16.) Many people responded. (Matt. 3:5-6; Mark 1:5; Luke 3:7.) John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, ate what he could find there, and wore rough clothes. (Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6.) He condemned sinful behavior even by local rulers and religious leaders. (Matt. 3:7, Luke 3:19-20.) This must have reminded people of stories of Elijah. (1 Kings 17:2-6; 18:16-19.) People naturally wondered what John the Baptist's appearance signified.

In the prologue, John contends that John the Baptist was an authentic prophet commissioned by the God identified in the OT. His role was to be a witness concerning the light—someone who would appear after John the Baptist and yet would surpass John the Baptist.

### **John the Baptist's understanding of his role**

- “the Jews of Jerusalem” -- John's use of this phrase and “the Jews” throughout his gospel is the subject of much discussion. Over the centuries, some have suggested John was anti-Semitic. Given John's reverence for the OT and his own Jewish identity, this is not persuasive to me. John does not disclaim his own Jewish identity and does not use these terms to mean all Jewish people. It is a way of referring to the powers-that-be, primarily in Jerusalem, that had the authority to speak for the Jews as a people-group, and, in this instance, to send priests and Levites to talk to John the Baptist. John surely understood, however, that when anyone speaks for an entire people group, there will be some members of the group who disagree with the representative's viewpoint, and so he does not mean to suggest that all Jews in Jerusalem sent these emissaries. The people with the authority to send priests and Levites to interview John the Baptist would likely have been the high priest's family and members of the Sanhedrin. Caiaphas was high priest from A.D. 18 to 36. His father-in-law Annas had been high priest from A.D. 6 to 15. The Sanhedrin was a group of 71 religious leaders that functioned as a supreme court. Under the Romans, the Sanhedrin's authority was generally limited to religion and other matters that the Romans did not care about. The Sanhedrin could not even lawfully execute an individual without Roman permission. (John 18:31.) Priests who ministered in the temple were supposed to be both Levites and descendants of Aaron. (Num. 18:1-7.) Levites likely refers to members of that tribe not eligible to be

priests. Levites provided support services for the temple such as music, doormen, and security.

- “not the Christ” John emphasizes that John the Baptist readily testified that he was not the Christ/Messiah predicted by the OT. John’s phrasing implies respect for John the Baptist’s character, perhaps because falsely claiming to be the Messiah could have gained fame and attention that probably would have been temporary, but still could have tempted a person with less integrity.
- “not Elijah” The delegation asks about Elijah, and John the Baptist denied that he was Elijah. This creates a tension with the other gospels where Jesus clearly portrays John the Baptist as fulfilling Malachi’s prediction that the Lord would send Elijah before the day of the Lord occurred. (Matt. 11:14, 17:10-13; Mark 9:12-13; Luke 1:17; Mal. 4:5-6.) One possible reconciliation is that some Jews understood Elijah’s unique departure from this life, (2 Kings 2:11-12), to mean that Elijah could literally return to earth, so John the Baptist was denying that he was literally Elijah, and Jesus meant that John the Baptist, despite not literally being Elijah, fulfilled Elijah’s prophetic role as described by Malachi. Alternatively, some argue that John the Baptist did not want to claim the role of Malachi’s Elijah figure, but Jesus bestowed it upon him anyway. I personally prefer the first theory, but neither one is provable.
- “not the Prophet” John the Baptist also denied being the special prophet predicted by Moses. (Deut. 18:17-19.)
- “Who are you?” After getting negative responses to the most common figures Jews associated with the end times, the delegation asks John the Baptist to explain who he is. They aren’t asking his name; they want to know how he views his role and the significance of his ministry.
- A “voice crying out in the desert” John the Baptist explains himself by referring to Isaiah 40:3-5, where an anonymous voice calls for mountains to be leveled and valleys to be raised to prepare for a display of the Lord’s glory visible to all humanity. On one level, Isaiah was predicting how the Lord would move the Persian king to allow the exiles to return and restore Jerusalem. On another level, though, Isaiah was proclaiming the Lord’s total control over history and His ability to deliver ultimate spiritual salvation for His people. John the Baptist thus was suggesting that his role was to warn Israel to take extreme measures to prepare for a display of the Lord’s glory.
- “Why do you baptize?” John says some Pharisees in the delegation asked this question. The Pharisees included scribes and sages committed to studying scriptures. They viewed the entire OT as authoritative and had high regard for oral traditional interpretations of scripture and regulations. They were known for strict adherence to legal principles such as tithing or observing the Sabbath and for resisting secular influence. The most politically powerful Jews do not seem to have been Pharisees, but it would not be surprising if the Sanhedrin included some Pharisees. Given the Pharisees’ knowledge of scripture, it certainly makes sense for the Jerusalem authorities to include some Pharisees in the delegation to John the Baptist. The Pharisees adapted to destruction of the temple and so had great influence on the rabbinic schools and traditions that developed after A.D. 70. In the gospels, Jesus criticizes the hypocrisy

involved in their legalistic positions and their failure to grasp the heart of the OT message, but they are not portrayed as cynical. Their question was probably sincere. Taking baths for ritual purification was common in Judaism, but that typically was not a rite that one person administered to someone else. So, if John is not claiming to be one of the end times figures that were expected to have authority, why is he practicing something that does not appear to be commanded by the Mosaic Code or taught by the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem?

- Baptism “with water” In John’s gospel, the answer is short reference to water combined with a declaration that someone unidentified is present who will have much greater authority. Other gospels clarify that John the Baptist viewed his water baptism as a symbol of repentance. Symbols are important, and the faith that comes with repentance is essential, but John the Baptist understood the baptism by the Holy Spirit provided by the one coming after John the Baptist to be the truly transformative and more significant theological event. (Matt. 3:11-12; Mark 1:4, 8; Luke 3:3, 16-18.) John the Baptist’s answer indicates that the right way to prepare to receive the one coming after him was to turn to the OT Lord in genuine repentance and faith.
- “Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan” John adds the description to distinguish the better known Bethany southeast of Jerusalem on the road to Jericho where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. Here, John appears to be referring to some other town north of Jerusalem and east of the Jordan river. One possibility is John was referring to an area called Batanea, a name similar enough that it could be spelled like Bethany in Greek. Another possibility is that there was a second, small town named Bethany across the Jordan that has been lost to history.
- **Main point:** John the Baptist told people to get ready because Israel’s Lord was about to do something big, and that big thing would not be focused on John the Baptist, but someone unknown who would far surpass John the Baptist.

## John 1:29-34 John the Baptist Part II

- “lamb of God” John reports that the day after John the Baptist’s dialogue with the Jerusalem delegation, John the Baptist saw Jesus and testified, first, that Jesus was the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is surprisingly difficult to know what John the Baptist meant. The OT is full of lamb references, but “Lamb of God” is not a recognized phrase. Perhaps John the Baptist was coining a new phrase drawing on aspects from at least three OT references. The lamb provided by God to Abraham to sacrifice instead of Isaac. (Gen. 22:7-8, 13-14.) The Passover lamb that shielded Israelites from the wrath of God. (Ex. 12:1-28.) The suffering servant who is led like a lamb to the slaughter, thereby making intercession for many. (Isaiah 53:7, 12.) But all of these lambs die, so why did Jesus’s disciples have such difficulty believing that Jesus would die? Did they focus on all the other titles for Jesus and minimize this one? Or, before the crucifixion, did they think of something like Psalm 23, where David portrays himself as a lamb that belongs to God? In any event, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that the title uses the imagery of a sacrificial lamb to foreshadow Jesus’s atoning death on the cross.

- “who takes away the sin of the world” The second half of the title may have been even more startling to the original audience because the Lamb’s removal of sin is not limited to Israelites; it extends to the world. If one ignored the rest of the gospel, one could use this phrase to support universalism—all human beings will be saved. But John clarifies multiple times that believing Jesus is needed to experience the saving effect of Jesus’s death, even though his death has sufficient saving power for all. (For ex. John 1:10-13; 3:18; 6:53-54; 8:24; 10:25.)
- “the one who surpasses me . . .” This phrase makes clear that John the Baptist now recognizes Jesus to be the person who will surpass John the Baptist, i.e., the one that God will use to display His glory, and that John the Baptist’s purpose in urging repentance was to help Israelites be in the spiritual condition to recognize Jesus.
- How John the Baptist recognized Jesus. John the Baptist explains that, when he was baptizing Jesus, John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit descend and remain on Jesus, and, further, that God prophetically revealed to John the Baptist that this meant Jesus was the one who would baptize people with the Holy Spirit and be the Son of God. In the OT, Saul and then David were identified as Israel’s legitimate ruler when the prophet Samuel anointed each of them and the Holy Spirit came upon them. (2 Sam. 10:1, 9-11; 16:13.) In Saul’s case, the Holy Spirit’s empowerment was only temporary. (2 Sam. 16:14.) The OT associated empowerment by the Holy Spirit with the Messiah. (Isaiah 11:1-5.) Although John’s gospel does not spend much time on Jesus’s baptism and anointing by the Holy Spirit, it functions like the anointing of Saul and David and is an important sign validating Jesus’s claims.
- “baptize with the Holy Spirit” As the other gospels clarify, John the Baptist said that the Messiah would baptize followers with the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 3:11-12; Luke 3:16-18.) The OT describes the Holy Spirit being given only to a few people, generally to empower them to accomplish God-given tasks. But many Jews associated the end of the age and appearance of the Messiah with a broader outpouring of the Holy Spirit among believers. (Joel 2:28-32; Eze. 36:24-32; 37:14.)
- “Son of God.” John the Baptist’s disciples likely understood this phrase as synonymous with “Messiah,” and to be a figurative way of describing God’s special affection and close relationship with the Davidic heir. (Psalm 2:4-12; see also Luke 1:30-33.) John, however, develops the idea that the title figuratively refers to Jesus sharing the same divine nature as God the Father, like a human son shares his father’s human nature. (John 5:19-20; 8:58-59; 10:30-39.)

#### **John 1:35-42 John the Baptist cedes the spotlight to Jesus**

- The day after identifying Jesus as the lamb of God, the one who was before John the Baptist, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and the Son of God, John the Baptist again sees Jesus and again declares him to be the Lamb of God.
- “two disciples” John the Baptist had two disciples with him. Some OT prophets had apprentices who wanted to learn from them. (Elijah/Elisha 1 Kings 19:19-21; Elisha/company of prophets 2 Kings 4:38, 6:1-2.) Rabbis eventually did the same thing. One of the disciples is Andrew, the brother of Peter/Simon/Cephas. Describing Andrew

as Peter's brother even though Andrew met Jesus first shows how prominent Peter had become in the church by the time the gospel was written. The other disciple is not identified. Many people believe the unnamed disciple to be John. This would explain John's familiarity with John the Baptist's ministry, and the details of the first day with Jesus in the following verses. It would also be natural for John and Andrew to be together because Luke indicates that Peter, Andrew, John, and James shared a fishing business. (Luke 5:1-10.)

- Meeting Jesus. At this point, John does not say that John the Baptist told his two disciples to start following Jesus, but given everything John the Baptist had said about Jesus, that was a rational conclusion for them to draw. John the Baptist continued his independent ministry after this date, but John 3:27-30 sounds like a clear instruction to follow Jesus for those disciples that had remained with John the Baptist.
- "What do you want?" On one level, a practical question that anyone might ask if two people started following him. But perhaps Jesus was also challenging them to think about what they wanted from Jesus and life.
- "Rabbi, where are you staying?" If the disciples answered Jesus's question directly, John does not tell us. But they indirectly answered it by addressing Jesus as "Rabbi," implying they wanted to learn from Jesus, and asking him where he was staying, implying that they would like to visit him. Although the term Rabbi eventually came to mean an ordained or certified Jewish instructor, at this point in time the term could be applied to any person who could teach theology in public, and was used by students as a respectful way to address a teacher. John's explanation of the word's definition shows he expected the audience of his gospel to include people familiar with Greek but not Hebrew or Aramaic.
- "Come and you will see." Jesus invites the two disciples to learn the answer by accompanying him. This is often how discipleship seems to work. Jesus often asks believers to walk with him and see where they end up rather than identifying future destinations.
- The "tenth hour" Jews typically started counting hours at 6:00 am, so the "tenth hour" would equate to 4:00 pm.
- Bringing Peter. Andrew was so impressed with Jesus that he tells his brother Simon that Andrew and the other disciple [probably John] had found the Messiah and convinced Simon to meet Jesus. This implies that Andrew and Simon fell within the group of devout Jews who still hoped the OT prophecies would be fulfilled. Given all the labels John the Baptist had applied to Jesus, it is interesting that Andrew focused on messiah. Given first-century assumptions about the Messiah, and the frustration of Roman subjugation, it is understandable that "Messiah" grabbed Andrew's attention more than "lamb of God." John gives both the Hebrew/Aramaic term "Messiah" and the Greek equivalent "Christos," both of which literally mean "anointed one." Again, these translations show John expected some of the audience to be unfamiliar with the language spoke in Palestine. Peter's Aramaic birth name was "Simon son of Jonah or John." (Matt. 16:17; John 21:15.) "Cephas" was an Aramaic word for "rock." "Peter" is a Greek word for rock. John indicates that Jesus bestowed the new nickname

immediately. Jesus's remarks to Peter and other disciples are part of a theme that Jesus had the ability to know a person's heart and thoughts. (John 2:24-25.)

### **John 1:43-53 Jesus gathers more disciples**

- **Calling Phillip.** The day after meeting Peter, Jesus decides to head to Galilee. John does not tell us why. Perhaps Jesus wanted to attend the wedding that will be mentioned in next chapter. In any event, Jesus finds a man named Phillip and calls Phillip to follow Jesus. Phillip's comments to Nathanael in the next verse indicate this was not the first time Jesus and Phillip had spoken. This verse reveals that Phillip, Andrew, and Peter were all from Bethsaida. Bethsaida was a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, near the border between Galilee and Traconitis. Its name basically means fishertown, so it is not surprising that Andrew, Peter, John, and John's brother James were fishermen. (Matt. 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-10.)
- **Recruiting Nathanael.** Like Andrew, Phillip immediately recruits a friend to come along. Phillip describes Jesus as the "one Moses wrote about and about whom the prophets also wrote." It's not clear whether Phillip was saying that (1) Jesus was the Messiah, or (2) the Prophet and the Messiah. Most commentators think Phillip's focus was on the Messiah based on Nathanael's subsequent comments. Phillip gives Jesus's full name: Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph. Most commentators believe the disciple John calls "Nathanael" is listed as "Bartholomew" in the synoptic gospels, in part because Bartholomew appears next to Phillip in those lists. (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-29; Luke 6:13-16.)
- **Nathanael's skeptical response.** Nathanael famously responds: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" This quip confirms that Nazareth was just a small town in Galilee that conferred no social advantages to Jesus. Phillip does not argue; he just invites Phillip to come and see. As with Peter, Jesus immediately makes a positive pronouncement about Nathanael. Jesus breaks through Nathanael's skepticism by demonstrating that he knew about Phillip's conversation with Nathanael even though Jesus wasn't there. Nathanael responds by calling Jesus "Rabbi" and two messianic titles: "Son of God" and "King of Israel."
- **Heaven open.** Jesus tells Nathanael and the other disciples that they will see greater signs and alludes to the vision of Jacob's ladder. Gen. 28:12-15. Jesus applies the vision to himself, using the title "Son of Man." This term has useful ambiguity. It can simply mean a human being. It could also refer to Dan. 7:9-14. The application of Jacob's ladder to Jesus portrays Jesus as the ladder, i.e., the link between heaven and earth. That makes theological sense, but when did the disciples see it? I felt the commentators had no persuasive explanation. Some pointed to the crucifixion, or the ascension, or every miracle in the gospel. If forced to pick, my best guess would be the ascension. (Acts 1:9-11.)
- **John's account of this series of days in the area where John the Baptist was ministering** is not included in the other three gospels. Those gospels describe Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow Jesus while those four disciples were fishing. (Luke 5:1-10; Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20.) Commentators generally harmonize the accounts

by concluding that the events described in John 1:19-51 occurred before the formal call to follow Jesus in ministry described by the other gospels.

- The synoptic gospels rightfully emphasize Peter's emphatic statement in the middle of the gospel accounts that Jesus was the Messiah. (Mark 8:27-33.) John indicates that the disciples thought and hoped that Jesus was the Messiah as soon as they began to follow him. Indeed, that's why they decided to follow him. That may seem inconsistent, but I don't think the synoptic gospels intended to imply that Peter's confession was the first time it had ever occurred to any of the disciples that Jesus could be the Messiah. In some respects, unmet first-century expectations concerning the Messiah's role made it harder to believe that Jesus was the Messiah as the gospel's narrative progressed. John the Baptist had questions in the middle of the gospel, (Matt. 11:2-6), and the crucifixion put just about everyone in a tailspin. Peter's confession represents a commitment to that belief despite the accrual of evidence that did not fit the disciples' preconceived notions of the Messiah.

**Main ideas:**

- Jesus never intended his mission to be a one-man show. He began developing disciples almost immediately after his baptism announced the beginning of his public ministry, and he did so through authentic and personal relationships.
- Most believers are introduced to Jesus via an invitation from someone they know—a friend or relative; we can't literally bring people to Jesus, but we can invite them to church or other events.