

# GOSPEL OF JOHN: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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***“The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness”***

John 1:19-29

Open your Bibles to the Gospel of John, Chapter One. We will be looking at verses 19 through 29. Let's read our text and then we'll take a look at it verse by verse. John writes:

**<sup>19</sup>Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”**

**<sup>20</sup>He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”**

**<sup>21</sup>And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”**

**He said, “I am not.”**

**“Are you the Prophet?”**

**And he answered, “No.”**

**<sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”**

**<sup>23</sup>He said: “I am**

**‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness:**

**“Make straight the way of the LORD,” ’**

**as the prophet Isaiah said.”**

**<sup>24</sup>Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>And they asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”**

**<sup>26</sup>John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. <sup>27</sup>It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”**

**<sup>28</sup>These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.**

**<sup>29</sup>The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**

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We left off last with John the Apostle summarizing what John the Baptist had to say about Jesus Christ. John was, after all, sent by God to be a witness of Him. This is what He saw.

First, in verse 15, he saw that Jesus is eternal (before him). He was both before John in priority and in existence — even though John was six months older than the Lord.

Second, Jesus was full of grace and truth. He literally is the Truth, the Word of God to all men. In His life, death and resurrection, Jesus met all the demands of the Law. Now God is free to share fullness of grace with those who trust Christ.

Finally, Jesus reveals God to us. As to His essence, God is invisible (1 Timothy 1:17, Hebrews 11:27). Man can see God revealed in nature (Romans 1:20), and in His mighty works in history. But he cannot see God Himself. Jesus reveals God to us. He is “**the image of the invisible God**” (Colossians 1:15), and the “**express image of His person**” (Hebrews 1:3). In fact, in John 14:9 He tells Philip that whoever has seen Him (Jesus) “**has seen the Father.**”

So now we know what John the Baptist saw. He has given us his witness.

But what was his ministry all about?

Why did God send him out in the wilderness?

That is what we are going to talk about in this session of our study. And, to me, it speaks volumes about our time. Let’s meet John (verse 1):

**Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”**

Because both of his parents (Zacharias and Elizabeth) were of the tribe of Levi (Luke 1), John could have followed in his father’s footsteps and served as a priest. But he chose to head out into the wilderness and do something no one had done before. As we will talk about in a moment, he was baptizing Jews. And he was gathering quite the following — so much so that the leaders in Jerusalem wanted to know who he was and what he was about. Maybe they even felt a little threatened by him. So they, “**the Jews**” as John calls them, sent some priests and Levites from Jerusalem to question him.

Their first question they asked was, “**Who are you?**”

This seems simple enough until you hear John’s answer. You see, he could have claimed to be a priest or a prophet. He could have told them that he was the miraculously born son of Elizabeth and Zacharias. He could have claimed to have been sent by God to

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fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi. But he didn't. Instead, this happened (verse 2):

**He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”**

Why would he say this of all things?

Because the people of his time were looking for the Messiah to come. “**Christ**” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “**Messiah**” or “**Anointed One**.” They were looking for the hope of His first coming. Many Jews of that time believed that Messiah was going to come and set up His kingdom, releasing the nation from the oppression of Roman rule. So John, in humility, nips in the bud the idea that he is the Christ. But he does so with a caveat, a hint...

He says, “**I am not the Christ.**”

William Barkley, in his commentary, says, “*It is as if John said, ‘I am not the Messiah, but, if only you knew, the Messiah is here.’*”

By the way, it was important for John to make this clear. Even as late as 250 AD there were some who still followed him and claimed he was Messiah and not Jesus. He had a huge following, because many were seeking relief from the iron fist of the Romans.

So if John was not the Christ, who was he?

The Levites continued pressing him to find out. Look at verse 21:

**And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?”**

**He said, “I am not.”**

**“Are you the Prophet?”**

**And he answered, “No.”**

Why did they ask John if he was Elijah?

I think there are two reasons. First, he certainly looked and lived like Elijah. He lived in the wilderness and wore burlap and ate honey and locusts. And he was a bit of a firebrand like Elijah. But they probably also had in mind Malachi 4:5-6 which says:

**<sup>5</sup>Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet**

**Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.**

**<sup>6</sup>And he will turn**

**The hearts of the fathers to the children,**

**And the hearts of the children to their fathers,**

**Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.**

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These were Messianic times. Like our time, people were wondering what in the world was going on.

Why was God allowing evil to surround them?

So they were searching the Scriptures to see what God was saying. And we should be as well.

They were looking for the First Coming of Messiah. We are looking for Him to return.

They were looking for all the prophecies about His coming, which they thought was about saving Israel. Because of this they expected the Conquering King of Isaiah 53. But Jesus first came as the Suffering Servant to save the world.

We should be looking for Him to come a second time, when He will turn His attention to Israel. But He will also judge the world that rejected Him.

They searched the Scriptures but misread them.

David Guzic helps us understand the future ministry of Elijah:

*This was fulfilled in John the Baptist in a figurative sense ([Matthew 11:14](#), [Mark 9:11-13](#), [Luke 1:17](#)). Yet because this Elijah comes before the coming of the great and dreadful day, we know that the Elijah prophecy is only completely fulfilled before the second coming of Jesus. [Matthew 17:11-12](#) and [Revelation 11:3-12](#) speak of this future fulfillment, when God will either send Elijah back to the earth on this special errand or send someone uniquely empowered in the spirit and office of Elijah.*

*ii. In anticipation of this, Jewish homes set a place at the table for Elijah at Passover, just in case he might come on that night to announce the news that Messiah has come. The empty chair and the cup that is filled but is never drunk are a testimony to their anticipation of Elijah's coming.*

Many prophecy experts believe that Elijah will be one of the two witnesses found in the Book of Revelation. He will be a witness of Jesus in Jerusalem during the Tribulation period, thus fulfilling this prophecy.

So John was careful to never say of himself that he was Elijah.

But one must wonder...

“What would have happened if Israel had accepted, rather than rejected, Jesus?”

Listen to what the Lord said in Matthew 11:13-14:

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**<sup>13</sup>For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup>And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.**

Would the kingdom have come then?

Maybe (probably).

But, for sure, John did minister in the spirit and office of Elijah. And these Levites knew there was something special about his ministry, so they asked him another question. They asked...

**“Are you the Prophet?”**

What Prophet, you might ask?

Listen to what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (This is the Prophet that they were asking about.):

**<sup>15</sup>The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, <sup>16</sup>according to all you desired of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’**

Some in this time mistakenly thought that this Prophet was a different person than Messiah. But Stephen, in Acts Chapter 7 clearly tells us that this “**Prophet**” is Jesus.

Remember that Jesus admonished the Jewish leaders because they could not “**discern the signs of the times**” (Matthew 16:3). And then, He wept over Jerusalem because the Jews did not know the “**Day of their visitation**” (Luke 19:44). Had they read their Scriptures correctly, they could have known the very day that Messiah rode into Jerusalem.

Daniel Chapter 9 gave them the very “**day**” that the Lord had made. But they were looking in the wrong direction. It is so important to rightly divide the Truth. The Jewish leaders and religious men did not. And this caused the people to be looking for the wrong Messiah. The Glory of the Lord was standing right there among them, but they could not see Him (as we learned last time).

These curt answers were probably starting to make the Levites a bit angry. But they try one more time to get John to reveal his identity to them. Look at verse 22:

**Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”**

There was no one else on God’s list of deliverers.

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So, who was this man that God was obviously blessing in his ministry?

One last time they asked him...

**“What do you say about yourself?”**

And he really has nothing to say. He didn't come to talk about himself. He was sent to talk about Jesus.

Jesus is the Word. He is the One they needed to hear from. He was full of truth and grace. He was the exact representation of the invisible Father.

John was none of these things, and he was not going to pretend to be one. But he was one thing — **a voice**. And you cannot see a voice. But you can hear it. Look at verse 23:

**He said: “I am**

**‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
“Make straight the way of the LORD,”’  
as the prophet Isaiah said.”**

John said, **“I AM not the Christ.”**

Then he said, **“I AM not Elijah or the Prophet.”**

But I AM — ego eimi — the **“voice of one crying in the wilderness.”**

John was not the Great I AM. He was the one chosen to be His herald. As Sandy Adams says of John, *“I'm not the guy, I'm just the cry.”*

In the first century it was common for visiting dignitaries to send out an advance team. One commentator explained it like this:

*The imagery was that before a king would visit a town, a messenger would go before him to announce his coming. The townspeople would hurry out to clear away the obstacles and fill in the washed out parts of the road to smooth the way for the king's coming. The messenger didn't call attention to himself, but to the coming king.*

That is what John sent to do — He was to make straight the way of Messiah who would come after him. His ministry was to point people to Jesus. He did not fill the prophecies we talked about earlier. But he did fulfill prophecy. Isaiah 40:3, a Messianic prophecy, says this:

**The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the LORD;**

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**Make straight in the desert  
A highway for our God.**

The religious leaders wanted to know who John was. But he wasn't really interested in talking about himself. He wanted to talk about his mission. From birth, he was called to prepare the way for Messiah.

I've got a little application for us here:

When did God choose you to be saved?

Paul tells us it was in eternity past. I believe He chose us for such a time as this. We can learn a lot about our identity if we learn the secret of John the Baptist. God chose us to simply be a voice to talk to people about Jesus. And like John, we are living in Messianic times. Now, we are not Elijah or the Prophet either. We are simply foolish things God has chosen to be heralds of the King of kings and Lord of lords. We are just voices to talk to whoever we meet on a given day about the Person, nature and return of Jesus Christ. This is really important to understand, because the Pharisees are going to want to know about us as well. Look at verses 24-25:

**<sup>24</sup>Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>And they asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”**

Having found out who John thinks he was, the Pharisees wondered about John's authority. If he wasn't Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet...

Why was he baptizing people?

The Pharisees were an important sect of Judaism at the time of Jesus. They numbered about 6,000 of the most influential people in Israel (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*). They held to a strict interpretation of the Law and embraced many oral traditions. So it was natural for them to wonder why John was baptizing.

Most often, baptism was reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism as a sign of renunciation of their past life. The Jews did have a kind of baptism called *mikveh*. But not the way John was doing it. A *mikveh* is a ritual bath that purifies the person entering into the water. A person who had, by some act, become unclean would do this as a way of becoming clean again. But what John was doing there in the wilderness was absolutely different. His was a baptism of repentance. And he had even called on the Jewish leaders to repent and be baptized. More on this a little later.

So, by whose authority was John doing this?

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And why was he baptizing Jews?

His answer probably stunned them. Look at verse 26:

**John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.**

When someone was baptized by John, it demonstrated a humble willingness to repent. Most likely, the way he performed it was the same as they would have if they were baptizing a Gentile convert.

I believe that, because of what John's ministry was all about, the people who were being immersed were preparing for Messiah to come. That is why John said, "**I baptize with water....**" It indicated that someone else was coming who would baptize in another medium other than water. Further, that Someone was already in their midst. But he would not reveal Jesus as the One, nor explain His baptism until the next day. Instead, he set himself aside and said this (verse 27):

**It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”**

To untie the strap of a sandal before foot washing was the duty of the lowest slave in the house. Among rabbis and their disciples, there was a student-teacher relationship that had the potential for abuse. The student was thought to walk in the footsteps of the rabbi. So almost anything the rabbi asked, the student would do, except to untie the strap of his sandal. That was considered too low. F. F. Bruce put it this way in his commentary:

*Every service which a slave performs for his master, a disciple will perform for his teacher, except to untie the sandal strap.*

John the Baptist thought himself unworthy to even do this lowly task. He was not out in the wilderness establishing a new religion or trying to exalt himself. He was pointing people to the Savior.

And that is what we need to do as well. We live in a time such as John did. So we need to point to the One who is about to come once again.

The One standing in the midst of the people who were there that day was John's motivation for ministry. He was out there to prepare the way for Him. Same with us. As we share Jesus with the least, last and lost, He will be right there with us. Listen to what Jesus commissioned His disciples to do in preparation for His return (Matthew 28:19-20):

**<sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching**

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**them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.**

What are we supposed to do?

First, make disciples.

Second, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, it is a spiritual baptism that Jesus affords.

Third, teach them all the things Jesus has taught us.

And, we are supposed to do this disciple-making here, there and everywhere (all the nations). But this is almost never easy. Look at verse 28:

**These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.**

Bethbarra was located near the Jordan River where it is believed that God rolled back the waters for Joshua and Israel to enter the land. So John’s baptism, like that crossing, was a signal of new beginnings. But don’t miss this:

It was out in the wilderness.

And that is where we are called to witness as well. When you head out into the streets and roads outside the door of the church, it can get rugged. The world is not a nice place. It is filled with both sin and sinners. The enemy is out there, roaming like a roaring lion seeking whom he can devour. The people out there hate Jesus and, as a result, they hate us. But we can tell them of our time in the wilderness, in the miry clay that our world has become. That is why we too must be a voice of one crying out, *and I mean crying*, in the wilderness. And when we do cry out the name of Jesus, this happens (verse 29):

**The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said,  
“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**

This is the Savior we point to. This is the One the world needs to know. And we have the privilege of sharing Him with the people we meet. But don’t worry. He has promised to be there with us, even to the end of the age (which I believe is just around the corner). And He has left with us the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth.

The world is ugly. But be of good cheer. Jesus has overcome the world.

Next time we are going to see what happens when Jesus comes into the picture. Read ahead to the end of the chapter and see what the Spirit has to say to you about this Jesus.

Let’s pray.