

## John 1:19-34

### Part Two

We are continuing this morning in our study of the Gospel of John, picking up with the second of a two-part look at verses 19-34 of chapter one. In our first look at this passage, we thought about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus and saw that one way of *characterizing* the interaction between these two figures was to think about the relationship between a picture and its frame.

A good frame, we said, is one that complements that which it is framing, in lots of different ways and *yet* does not draw attention to itself but rather *away* from itself and *onto* the particular subject it is framing. This is what John the Baptist did, and it is what his ministry was all about - preparing the way for God to send his Son and making sure that the peoples' attentions were focused not on him - that is, not on John the Baptist - but on Christ, and what God was doing through him. To put that another way: John's pattern of life and ministry was to be *self-deferential* and at the same time, *Christ referential*.

Now, in our first whack at this passage, we saw more of the *self-deferential* side of John's ministry while in this week's study we will see more of the *Christ referential* aspect of it. As one commentator describes it, ".....[in the previous passage]....we saw the Baptist's denial, where he emphatically said, I am not the Christ. [In this passage] we see the Baptist's affirmation, where he emphatically tells us who the Christ is.....[in the previous passage] .....we saw John point away from himself. This week we are going to see John point to another.

That's the main thrust of what we will be looking at this morning. Before we go any further, let's ask for the Lord's blessing on our time,

*Great Father in heaven, we ask that you would please attend to this reading of your Word and by your Spirit make this a useful and encouraging time for your people, and an honoring time for You. Use this sinful preacher and these fallible words to work in all of our hearts the daily miracle by which you transform us more and more into the image of your Son. We are grateful for your mercy and boldly ask for even more.....In Jesus name we pray.....Amen.*

(Read John 1:29-34)

Now, since baptism plays a significant role in this passage, it would be helpful, I think, to make a few remarks about this subject - in the hopes of promoting a greater understanding of what we are reading here. And so, as you probably remember from our previous study, one of the features of John's ministry as a forerunner to Jesus was his preaching a message of repentance - i.e., calling God's people to return to the Lord from whom they had wandered in their faithlessness and sin.

Those who *responded* to John's preaching and calls for repentance were then taken and baptized. And, as we saw before, it was this baptism that was so *particularly* annoying to the religious authorities in John's day. It was annoying because they didn't see how John had any authority to do the things he was doing. And more than that, it was *insulting* because John was having his followers - who were Jews in good standing at the local synagogue - but he was having these Jewish people undergo a ritual that, up until then, had only been required of *Gentiles* when they *became* Jews. So, before John came along, baptism was what you did to deal with the ritual un-cleanness of Gentiles in order to make them ceremonially acceptable in the Jewish faith.

But by taking *Jewish* people and applying to *them* this very same ceremony, John was making a statement about these Jewish people in particular - and indeed, about all Jews, in general. He was saying that, in the eyes of God, they were as "impure" and in need of cleansing as everyone else. They could not *rest* in their "Jewishness", they could not *rely* on their heritage, they could not *trust* in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham to secure them an automatic "pass" with God.

And so it was that John's preaching and his baptism were God's means of awakening the Jewish people from their spiritual slumber and alerting them to their spiritual poverty before God. That was *one* purpose for John's baptism.

And so, after Jesus turned thirty, and when the time came for him to begin his public ministry, it was only fitting that he do so by responding to *John's* ministry. As a result, Jesus comes to John, requesting baptism, not because he was *personally* in need of repentance, but to demonstrate his solidarity with John's ministry, to identify himself with the things that God was doing through John - and of which he was also a part.

However, there was a *further* purpose in Jesus' coming to John for baptism, and that reason is made clear in the verses before us this morning. Look at verses 31 - 34 again,

*".... I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel. And John bore witness: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. <sup>33</sup> I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>34</sup> And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God....."*

Now as you probably recognize, what we are getting in verses 31-34 is a *flashback*. John is *recalling* for us an incident that took place on some earlier occasion, and of which we have no narrative record. But from what John says here, God apparently had spoken to him on this previous occasion and had given him the *sign* or the *means* by which he would be able to positively identify this one who was coming *after* him.

Now you might wonder why such a sign would have been necessary. If you are at all familiar with the story of John's birth and Jesus' birth, then you will know that John's mother, Elizabeth, had received a visit from Jesus' mother, Mary, when they were both pregnant. And this was after both of their families had received a special visitation by an angel of God, telling them something about the identity of the children they were carrying.

And Luke's Gospel tells us that when Mary finally arrived at Elizabeth's home, the child that Elizabeth was carrying - who was John the Baptist - stirred suddenly in his mother's womb - he leapt - at the sound of Mary's voice. And in that moment, Elizabeth receives a special filling of the Holy Spirit - as was prophesied - and with that filling came the special, supernaturally given insight that Mary too was carrying a special child, even more special than her own. And so Elizabeth refers to Mary, in that moment, as "the mother of my Lord".

And so, with both of these families being aware of the unique identities of their children, and of the connection between them, you might be inclined to think that John *would* have known a great deal about Jesus in and through his growing up years. But, as the passage makes clear, this was not the case. John says, "I did not know him". So how could this be?

Well, for starters, you have to remember that all too often it is the case that when we read the Bible, we take with us all sorts of assumptions about what people understood, and how people related, how they got around, etc - assumptions that are more based on our own modern day experiences than they are on the historical realities of the situations about which we are reading.

And some of those things, I believe, come into play here. For example, while we know that Elizabeth and Mary had contact with one another early on, we have no record of any *further* contact between them, while their children were growing up. If you read Luke's Gospel carefully, you see that while Jesus grew up in *Galilee*, John grew up in the hill country of *Judea* - and I should say, the *distant, wilderness* hill country of Judea. As Luke tells us in the opening chapter of his Gospel, at verse 80, John was "in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance in Israel."

And so, the picture painted by Luke is of John growing up pretty much in isolation, away from the public eye until the time was right for him to begin his ministry. There were no train lines, no cars, no safe and secure routes between his wilderness home and Galilee. There were no phones or postal services to rely upon. In that day, when you were in the wilderness, you were *really* in the wilderness. And so while Mary did make an initial journey, it seems to me that we ought to regard that as a very special occasion, and not one that is likely to have been repeated with great frequency - it at all.

To this we should add the knowledge that, at the time of John's birth, both of his parents were very old. That was part of what was so miraculous about Elizabeth's becoming pregnant in the first place. At any rate, given this fact, it is highly probable that one or both of John's parents would have died while John was still young, leaving him even more isolated from his relatives, and from the strange and wonderful events and words surrounding his birth.

Still further, while both of these families were told of the identities of their children, that did not mean that they fully grasped the *significance* of the things told to them. We see this same thing happen frequently in the Gospels where, in spite of the things Jesus has said and done to reveal himself, his disciples consistently fail to believe and to fully understand the full implications of what Jesus is saying.

And so it is not hard to believe, at least in the case of John, that whatever he had been told by his parents about his identity and the purpose for which God had set him apart, and however much he had been told about Jesus, the reality is that there remained a fair degree of uncertainty as to the exact details and full significance of all that he had been told. Indeed, we see this reality demonstrated on a couple different occasions in Luke's Gospel where John, even *after* Jesus' baptism, still wanted further confirmation from Jesus as to his identity as the Messiah. Why? Because the Messiah he had been led to *expect*, by the people of his day, was different than the actual Messiah that was carrying out his God-given ministry before John's very eyes.

And so, taking all these realities together, we can see that while John understood that he was a forerunner for the Chosen One that God was going to send, the fact is that many years had passed since his being in the presence of the Lord in his mother's womb, years in which he would have had very little, if any further contact with his extended family. And there were many uncertainties in his own mind as to what *precisely* this Chosen One was going to be and do, and how the whole thing would take place.

And so it was that God gave John a way of recognizing Jesus *when he finally showed up*. There were no photographs or drawings that he could go by. Instead, God gave him an *event*. He gave him a sign to look for that would signal to him that among the many hundreds of people that would come to him for baptism over the years, one of them in particular would be the Chosen One.

And so, all of that has taken place. By the time this passage starts, Jesus has already come to John on a previous occasion, and the sign that God had told John about, the *event* he was watching for, *finally happened*. The Spirit of God, in the form of a dove, came down from heaven and *rested* and *remained* on Jesus.

And so this is *another* and in some ways, *more significant* purpose for John's ministry of baptism - not only as a call to repentance and a symbol of cleansing that needed to happen, but also to serve as the sign, and the special event that would identify Jesus, and which would signal and inaugurate the *beginning* of Jesus' public ministry and, along with that, the *fading away* of John's public ministry.

Now, as I said, all of that lies in the background to this passage and, Lord willing, will help you to hear and grasp some of the significances of this passage for God's people. There are many. I only have time to briefly introduce you to three of them....

Firstly, having taken so much time to explain John's statement that, up until Jesus baptism, it was not a settled reality in John's mind that *Jesus* and the *one he was to prepare the way for* were the same person - but having taken so much time to talk about that, I don't want you to miss *why*, or at least *one* reason why this whole event is so important for God's people.

Because what you see enacted here, in this movement from uncertainty to clarity as to Jesus' identity at his baptism - but that movement, and the way it came about, tells us something important about *God's revelation of Himself through his Son*, and it's this: John the Baptist's recognition of Jesus was not the result of some internal ability that he had to recognize Jesus. It was not the result of some subjective process on his part. Rather, *it was the result of something God did*, the active working of God. Further, this *recognition* and *understanding* that God gave John, came to him through an external, *objective* reality - in this case, baptism and the Spirit's *visible* descent upon Jesus. And *that* pattern is going to re-appear in a number of different places in this Gospel. John will come back to this theme on more than one occasion. Now how is that significant?

Well, for the original readers of John's Gospel, it would have been important because, as many writers have pointed out over the years, at the time that this Gospel was written there were some strange ideas beginning to circulate, and which were being adopted by some believers. These ideas were the seeds of what would later be known as "gnosticism". Now "gnosticism", simply put, was the notion that the knowledge of God was something that was only truly attainable by those who had gained special access to secret wisdom that others did not possess.

To put that another way, knowing God, in this view, was the result of an entirely internal, innate, subjective process - the credit for which, ultimately, lay at the feet of those who were fortunate enough and clever enough and diligent enough to achieve this special knowledge.

Now where all this came from, is not that important. What *is* important is that it was a very really problem in the early days of the church. And so, with that in mind, you can see why John *the Apostle* - the author of this Gospel - would draw attention to the fact that *John the Baptist's* recognition of Jesus was not the result of an innate, subjective process. John the Baptist says two times - two times - that he did not know that the Jesus standing in front of him was Jesus the Messiah - until that fact was confirmed to him by the events surrounding Jesus' baptism.

John emphasizes this because he wants to guard the readers of his Gospel from being led astray by some of the strange ideas starting to circulate in his day. He wanted them to see that the *ordinary* pattern of God's working, as seen in the example of John the Baptist, was to work through objective means to reveal himself to his people. To be sure, the understanding gained was *internal*, as all insight must of necessity be. But the important thing was that these *internal* understandings came about through objective, and not subjective, means.

For God's people today, that truth is equally important to grasp. As Christians today, we need to remember that wherever and whenever someone begins to truly grasp God's revelation of Himself through his Son - but whenever that happens, it is always the result of the divine working of God. Whenever people's eyes are opened, and Christ is revealed, it IS a miracle.

Further, we need to understand and expect that the ordinary means by which this miracle of seeing Jesus as the Savior He truly is - the ordinary means by which that happens *continues* to be through *objective* realities - like baptism, like the Lord's Supper, like the Scriptures, like the Preaching and Explaining of those Scriptures, whether by one person speaking to a group, or by one person speaking to another. That is the pattern we ought to expect today.

To expect otherwise - to expect that the way in which God reveals himself and guides his people is by *other* more individualistic, or subjective, or internal, or privatistic means - to expect and rely on that sort of thing is to subvert the pattern of the Scriptures and, more ominously, to create an environment where it is virtually impossible for Christians to keep one another accountable, to correct one another, to rebuke one another, and to gently restore one another when we begin to wander away.

The second thing I want you to see here is John's opening statement, in verse 29, in which he adds to the already significant list of descriptions of Jesus. As we've seen already, God has already confirmed to John that Jesus is the Messiah and so, the next time that John *sees* Jesus, he simply cannot contain himself and proclaims, "Behold" - for which an even better equivalent might be "*Look* - the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Wow! What a statement. It's one of those pithy, biblical, theological statements with which you could go down *very deep* and stay down *very long* - and still be only dealing with the surface of the matter. Obviously then, we won't be taking an in depth look at this. But let me give you at least a *couple* things to think about here.

One thing to think about is the *context* in which John's readers would have heard this statement, and in which *we* need to hear this statement. Firstly, there is the context *of this Gospel itself*. In the very short space of 28 verses, we have so far seen a number of very profound ascriptions given to Jesus. By the time you get to verse 29, you have been told that Jesus was *with God in the beginning* and, in fact, *was/is God*. You have been told that he was instrumental in the creation of the world, that he was the life and the light of humankind, and that he was God in human flesh. And now, on top of all that has already been said, John gives us this further description of Jesus as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".

Now, in addition to the context created in John's Gospel, this description of Jesus would have been meaningful to John's readers not just for literary reasons, but for *historical* reasons as well. The concept of a lamb being sacrificed has a long and distinguished history in the story of God's people, starting way back when Abel brought an offering to the Lord - an action which was received by God as acceptable worship.

Following that we see the life of Abraham in Genesis 12ff and how, at one point in his life, God gave him the most difficult test of faith that a person can undergo - to offer up his only son as a sacrifice to the Lord. Amazingly, Abraham submits to God's will in this and determines to see this test through to the end. And so as he is preparing to carry out this deed, when confronted by his son as to where the sacrificial lamb is - Abraham declares that *God Himself* will provide a lamb. And God did.

Then later on, under Moses leadership, we see the establishment of the OT temple and the sacrificial system that went along with that. Integral to this system were the various types of offerings and sacrifices that could be made, including and especially the sacrifices that were made on the Day of Atonement - one day a year - by the High Priest who made sacrifices on behalf of the entire nation, and which, among other things, included a *lamb* for sacrifice.

And through all of this you see a kind of progression - as one commentator has noted - from a lamb sacrificed for an individual (with Abel), to one sacrificed for a family (with Abraham), to one sacrificed for an entire nation (with Aaron the High Priest).

And so, over against that sort of historical background, John the Baptist's description of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away *the sin of the world* would have been quite significant, carrying the progression one step further - from an individual, to a family, to a nation, and now to *a sacrifice that is sufficient for the whole world*. And this last step would have been quite shocking to the Jewish people as, for the first time, the sacrifice, and its benefits, have now moved *outside* the bounds of ethnic Israel.

Nevertheless, as shocking as it may have been, it was precisely what was happening in and through Jesus' death. And these are the things that the writer of Hebrews, reflecting on this at some point later on, reminds us of - that while many priests had come and gone, and many sacrifices had been repeatedly made - *Jesus* was and is the *final* high priest, who has made the *final* sacrifice - of himself - which will be sufficient for his people, for all time, a people who will come from every tribe and tongue and nation. And the sin that was addressed *incompletely* and the wrath of God that was assuaged *temporarily* by the sacrifice of *mere* lambs and goats was now completely and permanently dealt with by THE LAMB - God's Lamb - Jesus - brought to the altar by God himself and *as* God himself, in human flesh - flesh that could bleed. Flesh that could die.

And the application of this - for both John's readers in the early church, and for his readers today - is seen by looking back at John 1:12 where, as you will recall, John said, "to all who did receive him, *who believed in his name*, he gave the right to become children of God..." With those words, John tied the *receiving* of Jesus to *believing in his name* - i.e., accepting that He is truly who He says He is, and who God has revealed him to be.

And, as we have seen in just this opening chapter, believing in Jesus' name means a lot of things because *Jesus has a lot of names*. God has revealed, and continues to reveal a great deal about his Son. And one of the things revealed - through John the Baptist - is this truth that we have just seen - that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That being the case, then receiving Jesus, responding to Jesus means responding to *this* truth about Jesus. And responding to the truth that Jesus is God's lamb sent to take away sin means *recognizing yourself* as one of the people whose sins Jesus was sacrificed *for*. To put it another way, recognizing this *great truth* about him, means accepting a *hard truth* about yourself. And, while it is a hard truth - it does not have to be an *eternal* one. If you have not yet received Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world - including YOUR sin - then let me urge you to do that today.

Finally, and very quickly, please note one other truth about Jesus which John, through his comments, makes us aware of, namely this: Jesus is not only the Lamb of God who takes away sin, he is also *the One upon whom the Spirit Remains*. That little word “remain” is very important and, if you’re not careful, you can miss it. Why is it important? Listen to these words from Isaiah 42, verse one, and following.....(Read Isaiah 42:1-8).

Isaiah talks about one who will come, who is identified as God’s servant in whom his soul delights, one who is described as his “chosen” or “elect” one, one upon whom God will put his Spirit, permanently, one who will establish justice, one who will be a light for the nations, who will open eyes that are blind and set prisoners free. John, the author of this Gospel, understands that Jesus is the one to whom Isaiah was referring. He is the one who will be distinguished, among other things, by the fact that God’s Spirit will rest upon him with a fullness and a permanency that will not be found in any other.

Do you remember those times in the OT when attention is drawn to the fact that the Spirit of God has been given to a certain person? If you do, then you will have noted that a certain pattern begins to emerge as you come across this phenomenon in the OT..And the pattern that you see is the fact that while the Spirit IS given, this gifting or filling does not seem to have any sort of *permanence*.

For example, when you read about Samson, in the Book of Judges, you see the Spirit coming and going, giving him strength and ability as he needed it in order to carry out his duties. You see this same sort of thing going on with the prophet Samuel, and with Israel’s king - Saul. But the point is, in the OT era the pattern of the Spirit’s working seems to have been fleeting AND tied to specific events or occasions.

And this is why John’s statement that Jesus is the one upon whom the Spirit came *and remained*, is so important. By saying that the Spirit *remained* with Jesus, John wants to make sure that his readers see the *uniqueness* of Jesus as the promised One. Jesus is not just some other guy upon whom God poured out his Spirit. He is the possessor of the Spirit in a way that no one else has ever possessed the Spirit. He is the one spoken of in place like Isaiah 42, which we’ve already seen, or Isaiah 11:1-2 (read this).

John wants us to see that Jesus is the one with the FULL and PERMANENT anointing of God’s Spirit. And yet, as great as that is, John wants us to see beyond that to a further reality - that not only is Jesus the supreme *recipient* of God’s Spirit, he is the supreme *distributor* of that Spirit to God’s people. As John the Baptist has described him earlier, he is the one who will baptize his people *with the Spirit* and with *fire* - which is just another reference to the same thing.

And the significance of this, for God’s people in every age, is that we have to see that *because Jesus* is the one upon whom the Spirit remains, because he is the one who possesses the Spirit like no other, and because he is the one who *baptizes* with the Spirit - this means that we cannot and must not separate these two realities from one another. To receive Jesus *IS* to receive the Spirit, in all His fullness.

There are not two classes of Christians in the world - those WITH the Spirit and those WITHOUT. That sort of separation is simply not possible because it is a *package* deal. To receive Jesus, is to receive the one upon whom the Spirit remains. You cannot artificially separate one from the other. If you were to suggest such a thing to the Apostle John, he would have looked at you as if you had lost your mind.

To receive Jesus, is to receive the one who was and is God. It is to receive the one upon whom and in whom the Spirit dwelled fully and permanently. In short, to receive Jesus is to receive all that God is - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - all in one. When you receive Jesus - you get everything. If you reject Jesus, you lose everything.

Lots more to say. We'll pick this up again next week.....Let's pray....