

## **John: A Voice in the Boonies**

**John 1:19-34**

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Turn with me to the gospel of John. Everybody loves John's gospel. It's the gospel Billy Graham sends every recent, new-born convert to read. I was wondering as we were praying together this evening, when was your first experience of reading John's gospel? And you can never tire of John's gospel. Every time you read it, there is something new and fresh to see in it. Turn with me to John 1, and we're going to pick up the reading at verse 19, reading through to verse 34.

And this is the witness 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. And 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. 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 bore witness 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. Amen. May God bless to us the

reading of His holy and inerrant word. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, we ask now for the blessing and the illumination of Your Spirit as we turn to these familiar passages from the Gospel of John. We pray, Lord, that we might behold something of the beauty and attractiveness of Christ. For Jesus' sake we ask it, Amen.*

History hasn't been very kind to John the Baptist. He's often portrayed in paintings especially, as some kind of wild-eyed, half-crazed person. Perhaps from the painting of Leonardo DaVinci of John the Baptist, which almost portrays him like a woman. Some of you will remember the Rev. Brockelhurst in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. If you haven't read the book, perhaps you've seen Zefferelli's portrayal of Rev. Brockelhurst—intimidating, awful creature. Jane Eyre, the orphan that she was, you remember, is being sent by her aunt to a school where the headmaster is this character, the Rev. Brockelhurst. And he says to little Jane Eyre, "Are you a good child?" She doesn't know what to say. Her aunt answers in her place, "The less said about that, the better," she says. So, Rev. Brockelhurst says to Jane Eyre, "Do you know where the wicked go at death?" "They go to hell," she says. "And what is hell?" "A pit of fire," she says. "And should you like to fall into that pit and burn there forever?" "No, sir," she says. "And what must you do to avoid it?" "I must keep in good health and not die," she says.

That portrayal of the Rev. Brockelhurst reminds me of certain portrayals of John the Baptist, but they are unfair portrayals of John the Baptist. To be sure, John the Baptist looked a little strange, and that is for a deliberate reason. But John the Baptist's ministry was the most beautiful ministry that any man could ever have been given, because his ministry was to point sinners to Jesus Christ.

The thing I want you to go home with tonight is: "Is someone pointing you to Jesus Christ?" Whatever has been on your agenda today; whatever trouble you may have been facing; whatever hope, aspiration, goal—whatever it is, it doesn't matter what it is—John the Baptist wants you to look to Jesus Christ.

Now, there is an abrupt change in this prologue in the first chapter of John's gospel. It begins as if it were from above, one of the most magnificent statements to be found in Scripture as to the identity, the deity of Jesus Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God, the same was in the beginning with God." But now, we move from there as if it were right down to earth and we have a portrayal of John the Baptist whose beyond the River Jordan baptizing hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people; a baptism of repentance, and among those whom he is baptizing is now the fully-grown Jesus Christ of Nazareth. John says he didn't recognize Him. Of course, John knew who He was; they were cousins, after all, but he didn't recognize the true identity of Jesus Christ.

And what transpires now in these verses that are before us, from verses 19-34, are three word pictures taken from the Old Testament forming something like a collage. All you mothers know about collages, that posh word wasn't in existence when I was growing up, but everybody now seems to be doing collages with their little children. Here is a collage of three word pictures drawn from the Old Testament.

### **I. John was a voice in the wilderness warning God's people to repent while there is time.**

The first of which is this. John the Baptist is a voice in the wilderness. John has been baptizing. There has been something of a revival that has taken place; a genuine revival, an outpouring of the Spirit. Sinners have been convicted of their sin, and they are flocking to hear this preacher just as they did to Jonathan Edwards or George Whitfield or whoever that God has used in centuries gone by—so God used John the Baptist—the conduit through which the gospel was being proclaimed. Jerusalem is alarmed as you might expect. We read in verse 19 of their concern. They send priests and Levites in order to find out what it is that this John the Baptist figure is saying and doing. They are concerned about both his message and his methods.

Notice in verse 23, the reference to wilderness. “He is a voice crying in the wilderness.” Of course, it is taken from the Old Testament, but that little word “wilderness” is full of meaning. Reminds us first of all, of where we are currently on Sunday evenings—in the wilderness. I've got to rephrase that. You understand what I mean by that. We've just come out of Egypt, we're on our way to the Promised Land; we're in that period known in the Old Testament as the wilderness. It's a voice crying in the wilderness that redemption in the fullness of God's promise is coming.

But this word “wilderness” perhaps reminds us of something else too. Because what God has been doing ever since the fall, has been a restoring of the wilderness; bringing back, as it were, the Eden that was lost. So that God's work of redemption, our salvation, in all of its aspects is part of God's plan of restoring creation, of changing the wilderness and making it into a beautiful garden. So that when John, the author of the Gospel, comes to write the Book of Revelation, the way in those final chapters that he portrays the new Jerusalem is not only as a new city, but also as a new garden where fruit and trees flourish to the glory of God.

At this point before the coming of Jesus Christ, John is in the wilderness. His message is that the last days are on the horizon, and that it is necessary for sinners to repent and be baptized as a symbolic representation of their desire for their sins to be forgiven. Jerusalem has sent priests because it was the priests who did the ceremonial washings or baptisms, and they are, as you can imagine,

a little concerned about why John the Baptist, who is not a priest, is doing this out in the wilderness. They send Levites; these are the temple theological police coming in order to scrutinize the message of John the Baptist. John is preaching a message in which he is saying that the last days are dawning.

So who does John think that he is? Is he the promised Messiah? “No,” John says. “I’m not the promised Messiah, but I am the one who is declaring that the last days are near. I am not the King, but I am the herald of the King.” So, they ask him, “Are you Elijah, then?” Of course, the reason they ask if he is Elijah is because the last few verses of the Bible in the Book of Malachi, contain a promise that in the last days, Elijah, the prophet, will come again. John the Baptist probably looked like Elijah. But he is not Elijah either. Is he then the prophet referring to that promise in Deuteronomy 18, that in the last days a prophet like unto Moses would come? John says, “No, he’s not the prophet either.” Who is he, then? “I am the voice,” John says. John plays with them a little bit and says if you knew your Bibles, you’d know that passage of prophecy in Isaiah 40, perhaps one of the most wonderful chapters in the Old Testament, especially in times of stress. They contain beautiful words of promise and comfort that “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up *with* wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” And he quotes verse 31, from chapter 40. You all know if from Handel’s *Messiah*. “The Lord is coming. Make a straight road for God to come and visit and redeem His people.” And John is the one who is proclaiming that message. And they would have recalled, of course, that Isaiah had spoken those words to those who were then in exile of God’s promise to redeem them from Babylonian exile, but in and with and under those promises were also promises to the effect that God would redeem them from a spiritual bondage and exile that they found themselves in. That God would redeem them from their sins and from the guilt of their sins and from the corruption of their sins. “I’m not the King,” John the Baptist says. “I am not the Messiah, but I am the voice that precedes the coming of Messiah.” My task, John says to them, is to show your need of Him, so that when He appears, you will embrace Him as the long-expected Messiah and redeemer of His people. So, there’s the first word picture—a voice crying in the wilderness, taken from out of Isaiah, chapter 40.

## **II. The Holy Spirit identifies Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah.**

The second word picture that makes up this collage is that of the spirit as a heavenly dove. John is not only a voice crying in the wilderness, but he is also the one who gives testimony to the Spirit as the heavenly dove. Now, before the priests and Levites had arrived, John had seen something. It’s not recorded in any detail in John’s gospel, but it’s recorded in the other gospels. What is it that John the Baptist had seen? Well, he had seen the Spirit of God descending on Jesus as a dove. He speaks of it in verse 32, “I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven.” A dove. Why a dove? Now, forget all those

pictures that are coming into your head of magic, black hats, silk, and out comes a dove. Throw all those out of your mind for a minute.

Why a dove? First of all, because of the story of creation. The story of creation has played an enormous part in this prologue of John's gospel. I think John is still thinking about and remembering Genesis one and two, and in that creation story, you remember, when the earth was without form and empty and God begins to mold it and shape it, and He sends His Spirit as a bird to hover and brood over the waters. As the voice crying in the wilderness, proclaiming the one who is coming to restore all things, what a beautiful way to describe the Holy Spirit as the dove who broods over the waters. You remember the flood story. In the story of the flood, it was the dove that brought back the branch, the leaves, as a symbol that the judgment of God had passed and the new order had begun.

There was another occasion in which a dove played a crucial role. When a poor person couldn't afford a lamb or goat, they would come to the temple in need of having their sins forgiven, and they would bring two turtledoves. And one of those doves would be sacrificed and through that sacrifice, the imagery would be given, portrayed, of the means of forgiveness of sins and peace with God. John is saying all of those things. It's a whole host of pictures. And John says in verse 33, I didn't recognize Him, the person who came and stood in the River Jordan, and as John poured water over Him, the Spirit comes down in the form of a dove and rests upon Jesus of Nazareth. John said, "I didn't recognize Him." Of course, he knew who He was. They were cousins. But he didn't recognize the full significance of *who* He was until this dove had rested upon Jesus. This, this is the one, John is saying. This is the one in who creation is going to be made anew. This is the one who brings the message that judgment is past, and forgiveness is near. This is the One through whom sin is atoned for. Do you see the message and the collage? Not only is John a voice in the wilderness; he's the one who speaks of the Spirit who comes in the form of a dove and rests upon Jesus identifying Him as God's answer and God's solution to this broken world and to broken hearts.

### **III. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.**

But there's a third word picture that John brings to the surface and to his ministry and teaching--not only a wilderness voice and not only a heavenly dove, but a burdened lamb. And it's as though a light has been turned on. It's almost as though in John's preaching he is saying, "I've been reading the Old Testament. I've been reading Exodus and I've been reading Deuteronomy and I've been reading Isaiah and, all of a sudden, it all makes sense to me now." And it all comes together to a focus in this person, Jesus of Nazareth. It's an amazing claim.

You know, we sit here and we think, "Isn't that interesting?" But this is an

astonishing claim that John the Baptist is making. It was a claim for which his life would be taken because of it. And here's this third picture as Jesus as the burdened lamb. Think of that story. Wonder if John the Baptist had it in his mind as he was preaching and teaching in the river Jordan? The picture of Abraham and Isaac as they are making their way up Mount Moriah—the story of Genesis 22. Abraham has said that when he gets to the top of Mount Moriah that he will make a sacrifice to the Lord. Now, Abraham was old and Isaac was carrying the wood for the sacrifice and he has the knife for the sacrifice, and as they are making their way up the mountain, Isaac turns to his father Abraham and says, “Father, we've got the wood and we've got the knife and we've got the fire, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” And you remember what was given; it wasn't a lamb that was caught in the thicket; it was a ram that was caught in the thicket. As though that story is saying, “Yes, where is that lamb? Where is the lamb that we need for the sacrifice?” Because although this ram is a sacrifice; it's not *the lamb*. Nor was it all of those lambs that were slain on Jewish altars; they couldn't forgive sins because those sacrifices had to be repeated over and over and over. On some feast days, you could see outside the temple a trench going all the way down to the valley beyond, and you could see the river of blood coming from the sacrifices on the altar of the temple. And day after day, and week after week, and year after year, it was repeated again and again and again.

Now, do you see what John the Baptist is saying to these priests and Levites from Jerusalem? With all of their theology and all of their tradition, all of their symbols, all of their structures, all of their buildings, all of their concern for this, that, and the other? John is saying, “*Here is the Lamb. Here is the Lamb. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” Was there ever a more beautiful text of Scripture than that one? Was there ever a more beautiful sermon preached in the history of sermons? “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” What greater message could anyone ever proclaim than that one? What an honor to be able to point to Jesus of Nazareth and say, “*He's the One! He's God's Messiah. He's God's prophet. He's God's priest. He's God's King. He's the Lamb; it's His blood that's going to forgive us our sins.*”

Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to the cross of Jesus I cling. He is the one wounded for our transgressions. He is the one bruised for our iniquities. He is the one upon whom chastisement is going to be laid that is going to bring us peace. It is by His stripes that we are healed. And John is saying, “I didn't realize it, until I saw Him standing in that river identifying Himself with all of the sinners that were coming, and then, all of a sudden the dove descends and God is saying, ‘This is My One; this is My Son. This is the One in whom I am well pleased. This is the One I have promised. This is the Son of My Covenant promise.’”

And John is saying to you, as he was saying to these priests and Levites who didn't hear it. They didn't hear it; they didn't accept that message. They rejected that message. But John is still saying to you; he's still preaching to you. He is saying to you, “This is the One. This Jesus of Nazareth is the One. The answer

to the problem of your broken, sinful heart; the problem of your wretched condition, and the problem of your guilt, the burden of your soul; He is the one who takes it away.

What a beautiful message. May that voice crying in the wilderness that is a portent of a new creation that is to dawn, ring in our hearts tonight. When you go up I-55 home or wherever you're going, keep one eye on the road, but keep one eye on Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, that the things of earth may grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. Can you see it tonight? In this first chapter of John's gospel, it's as though the words come apart and a blaze of glory shines forth. God's answer to our wretched condition--"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, as we bow in Your presence, we thank You from the bottom of our hearts for the provision of a Savior, of a Prophet, and a Priest, and a King--a substitute to provide satisfaction for our sins. We thank you for Him who bore our sins in His own body upon the tree; who gave His life as a propitiation for our sins. Help us now this evening, as we go our separate ways, to rejoice in the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ. That by Your sovereign grace, we have come to know Him and believe Him; that He truly is the Son of God and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Hear us Lord, for Jesus' sake, we ask it. Amen.*

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