



The Voice and the Lamb

Series: John – That You May Believe

John 1:19-34

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Having finished his incredible prologue to his gospel, the Apostle John now sets himself to telling the story of Jesus, the Son of God and he begins by jumping with both feet smack dab into the middle of the ministry of John the Baptist, or as we called him last week, John the Witness. John was the forerunner of Jesus Christ, the herald of the Savior. His ministry was marked by bold, powerful and pointed preaching, by calling out the sins of the common people and also of the religious elite in Israel, by calling people to repentance – to turn away from their sins -- and to be baptized as a sign of that repentance so that they might prepare their hearts for the coming of the Lord. From the other gospel writers, we know that John was a unique man. Matthew describes John and his ministry by saying, **“Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”** (Matthew 3:4–6, ESV)

He was not formally trained, was not a part of the religious elite and was not endorsed by the religious leaders of Israel and for that reason, he came into conflict with them. They hated John because he was plain spoken. Matthew, again, gives us insight saying, **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** (Matthew 3:7–10, ESV) To say that John was a phenomenon and that he was hated by the religious elite in his day, would be an understatement.

A Brief History of the Spiritual State of Israel

To really understand the significance of John's ministry, we need to know something about the religious and spiritual state of the nation of Israel at this time. To put it bluntly, in one word, that word would be "corrupt." God's truth, that had been given to Moses and the prophets after him, the Jewish religion that was founded on the revelation of God's Law, His covenant, a covenant that described who Israel was to be as the people of God, the Law that described righteous living and also their sin, the Law that described God's gift of the sacrifices and offerings that temporarily covered the sins of the people and that were given as a picture of the Savior who was to come and deal with sin once and for all – all of it had become corrupted, degraded, polluted, warped, and tarnished.

There were some faithful people in Israel, a few who understood the truth of the Jewish religion – that it was given to point to God's coming Savior King, but they were very few. The Jewish religion was dominated by a group of men, the council known as the Sanhedrin. They were the leaders and priests of the Jewish religion and they were made up of two groups – the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were the political and theological liberals of their day. They did not truly believe the truth of God's Word, but instead used it as a political weapon, a weapon to keep them in power as the rulers of Israel. They were the majority of the Sanhedrin. Then there were the Pharisees. They were the religious conservatives of their day, the keepers of the Law, only they corrupted the message of God. Rather than understanding the Law as pointing to the need for a Savior, they had taken the Law of God and reinterpreted it, turning it into a set of rules and rituals that they said could make someone to be right with God. Follow their rules, do what they said, pay them the proper honor, obey them as good Jews, and you could have eternal life. They, in effect, had usurped God. They obscured and twisted the truth of God's revelation, making themselves the chief leaders and masters of the people and the result was spiritual darkness and futility.

These men had turned the house of God, what was to be the house of prayer – of meeting with God, and had turned it into a den of thieves – extorting money from people, making them pay exorbitant prices in order to purchase temple-approved sacrifices. Sacrifices and offerings lost their meaning. Corporate worship was empty of spiritual truth and life. Rather than preaching and teaching the Word of God, they taught their own imaginations and theories, their own codes and rules. They used their corrupted form of religion to take advantage of the people and to rule over them and the result was spiritual darkness and the

fracturing and scattering of God's people. These men, Sadducees and Pharisees, were the very epitome of the worthless shepherds of Ezekiel 34. There, Ezekiel spoke for God saying, ***“The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered;”*** (Ezekiel 34:1–5, ESV) This was the spiritual state of Israel. And yet God promised, through Ezekiel, to change all of that.

““For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David (that is a prophetic reference to Jesus as the descendant of David), and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David – Jesus -- shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.” (Ezekiel 34:11–12, 22–24, ESV) And this is what the gospel is all about – God rescuing His flock, Jesus saving His people.

The amazing thing is that despite the spiritual darkness of the nation of Israel, there was still a lingering expectation that God would one day send someone, a King, a Messiah, who would fix what was wrong. That belief took many forms – some religious leader who would bring peace or righteousness back to the people, because of the Roman occupation of Israel a mighty warrior who would lead the overthrow of the Roman government and make Israel great again, a leader who would make them prosperous once more, someone who would represent God in a special way according to their desires and hopes. But as usual, when it comes to looking for deliverance, the hopes of every generation are set too low. The Messiah that God would send would indeed bring peace and righteousness, would overthrow the greatest enemy, would deal with the greatest problem of man and bring unparalleled blessing to those who would receive Him – but they had no idea who it was and how it would happen.

At any rate, when John the Witness showed up in the wilderness, preaching repentance and baptizing, the first prophet Israel had seen in 400 years, he caused quite a stir. The religious leaders, the elite, were greatly troubled by him. He was drawing out people to hear him preach, replacing them as the spokesman for God, preaching and baptizing and upsetting the apple cart. They wanted to know who he thought he was, on what authority he spoke and baptized. John told them – I am a voice. Let's look at this, again.

John – The Voice (19-28) Pick it up with me in verse 19, **“And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.””** (John 1:19–21, ESV) Now here is what's going on. The Jews – the religious leaders – sent out a delegation of priests and Levites to question John about his ministry, to find out why so many people were flocking to him out in the wilderness to hear him preach and to be baptized by him as a sign of repentance. It was a group comprised of both Sadducees and Pharisees. They just had to know – who was John? Who was this guy? His popularity demanded that they find out. He was an enigma. He was of priestly descent and he could have been a part of their crowd, part of the religious elite and living like them – but he wasn't.

They just had to know – who are you? Let me just tell, John knew who he wasn't. There was no pride, no self-exaltation, no self-admiration. John knew who he wasn't. When they asked him, “Who are you?” John knew exactly what they were asking. They were asking if he were the Messiah and he could not have been more emphatic in his answer. **He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.”** “I am not the Savior King. I am not the Messiah.” It was strongest reply that he could possibly make to that line of questioning. John knew who he wasn't.

Still not satisfied, they wanted to know, “What then – are you Elijah?” It was a good guess. John looked and acted a lot like him – from his dress to his fiery preaching. Malachi, the last prophet 400 years ago, had spoken on behalf of God saying, **“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.”** (Malachi 4:5, ESV) That had been taken as a sign that before God's king showed up Elijah would come, but again

John was emphatic, **“I am not.”** Now, if you know the Bible, you know that Jesus called John, the Elijah that Malachi was talking about, so what gives? John knew that they were expecting the literal Elijah who was taken up to heaven in chariot of fire. He was not the literal Elijah – Jesus was speaking of John coming in the spirit and power of Elijah. And what is more, John was a humble man. He wasn’t interested in building a ministry around himself as the latter-day Elijah. It wasn’t about him at all. He did not want to be a distraction.

The delegation had one more possibility. They asked him, “Are you the Prophet?” They were referring to the prophet that Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15, **““The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—” (Deuteronomy 18:15, ESV)** The Jews thought that maybe he was a second Moses like figure, the Prophet, capital P. Again, John’s answer was emphatic and even more terse – “No.” John knew who he wasn’t.

The delegation is getting frustrated. **“So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”” (John 1:22, ESV)** And his answer is powerful. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah in verse 23, **“He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”” (John 1:23, ESV)** He says in essence, “I’m not anybody. I’m not the one that matters here. I am just a voice.” What is a voice? It’s a sound, that’s all. When he says this it is so self-forgetful, so self-deprecating. Who he is doesn’t matter, what he says does. The attention is not upon John, the glory is not for himself – it is all for Christ. And that is one of the chief things that sets John apart from the Pharisees and Sadducees – that they are glory stealers and he is not. It is the message that is important, not the messenger. And his message is to “make straight the way of the Lord,” that is, to make everything ready for the coming of the Lord’s chosen one.

It’s a picture of the way a king would come and visit his people. A herald would go before him to announce his coming. The townspeople would then hurry out of the town and remove obstacles and fill in potholes. The messenger was no one; the king was everything. John’s announcement of the coming of the kingdom and his call to repentance were the ways of preparing the way and making the path straight for the coming of the Lord. The Lord is coming. God’s King, God Himself is coming! It is huge news, but the delegation from the Jews act as if they are deaf. They aren’t shocked or surprised. It’s like they have a set of questions to ask and don’t even think about the answers.

In fact, they tip their hands in what the Pharisee members of the delegation ask next.

“(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, ‘Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’” (John 1:24–25, ESV) What are you doing baptizing, then? They knew what baptism was about, what it represented. Gentile converts to the Jewish religion were baptized to represent their old lives and their Gentile sinfulness was being washed away, but what was he doing baptizing Jews? What warrant, what right did he have to do this? What was he doing baptizing Jews and calling them to repentance? Did he think that they were common sinners like everyone else? And the answer to that is “Yes!” YES! They were sinners in desperate need of the Savior, in desperate need of forgiveness. But not just the common people, the religious elite as well. They were sinners and all of their corrupted and twisted religion could not save them. All of their rules and rituals, all of their traditions were worthless before the Lord and the Lord was coming.

“John answered them, ‘I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.” (John 1:26–28, ESV) John keeps turning to the conversation back to Jesus. Do you see it? It’s like he’s saying, “You guys don’t get it. In this very throng, these people that have come out to the Jordan to be baptized there is standing the very Messiah of God, the Lord Himself and you don’t seem to understand. I am doing all of this by His authority, for His sake, by His warrant. This isn’t about me. You don’t seem to get it. It is all about Him – I am not even worthy to untie his sandals.” That was the job of slaves and John didn’t see himself as worthy to even do that.

Beloved, we could do with a lot more of that spirit, that heart, today – not only from preachers, especially from preachers, but from Christians in general. John was not consumed with himself, his status, his story, his glory – none of that. He was consumed with Christ. John Calvin made a great point. He observed, “There is, indeed, nothing that man’s nature seeks more eagerly than to be flattered.” He goes on to point out that self-love is innate in us all and that people will flock to preachers who tickle their pride and build their self-esteem. But such talk only deceives us and drives us into utter ruin. But not John. He understood and embraced his role, his calling, his ministry. He keeps the spotlight on Jesus. He avoids drawing attention to himself or even talking about himself. He continually brings the light to bear on Jesus Christ. It is no exaggeration to say that John knew that he had no

reason to exist except to bring glory to and exalt Jesus Christ. John's one reason for existence was Jesus Christ. Imagine how revolutionary that thought, that belief in our own hearts would be. I am a voice. He is the Word. I am nothing. He is everything. That would revolutionize our lives and the church. John knew who he was not, because he knew who Christ is – the Lamb of God. Look at this with me.

Jesus – The Lamb of God (29-34) Having completed their fact finding mission, the delegation from the religious elites take off, but then John tells us, starting in verse 29: ***“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, ESV)*** You may have heard this so often that it doesn't hit you like it should, but this was a radical thing to say about a man, about a not-so-common carpenter to a bunch of Jews who for years had been offering their sacrificial lambs at the temple. In essence, John is saying, “Here is the man, the One that I have been tell you about, the One whom God has sent to be what all of the thousands of lambs that have been offered in the temple have only symbolized. Here is God's King, God's Lamb, sent not only for Israel, but for the whole world.”

Beloved, you know what man says, “Behold?” The man that sees, the man that sees something with perfect clarity, who wants you to see what he sees. This is man who sees mankind's – yours and my – greatest problem – our sinfulness, our rebellion against God, our failure to keep His laws, our wickedness at heart, our guilt before God and our inability to pay for it, the judgment and death that we deserve, the hell we have earned – and – God's answer to our sin, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

This is sacrificial language. It goes right back to Isaiah's description in Isaiah 53, ***“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?” (Isaiah 53:6–8, ESV)***

John says, “Behold” – set your eyes on the Lamb of God. This is what you need. This is who you are looking for. This is God's Messiah, this is God's King, and He comes to bring peace with God and righteousness to man, to overthrow our greatest enemy – sin and guilt, to deal

with the greatest problem of man – our enmity with God, and to bring unparalleled blessing to all those who will receive Him. And He does it in the only way that He can, in the only way that it can be done, by becoming the Lamb, the sacrifice for our sins.

Johns shines the spotlight on Jesus exclusively. Here is God's Lamb that you need. God is holy and He is just. He must punish sin and if you are to be forgiven, if you are to receive divine pardon for your sins, it can only be granted in one way. God must accomplish the humanly impossible. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, must come to earth and stand in the place of guilty sinners, suffer the pain of death, suffer the agony of the wrath of God against sinners, so that you be forgiven by faith in His sacrificial death for you. There is no other way. God cannot ignore His justice and He cannot and will not clear the guilty. But He laid on Christ, the sacrificial Lamb, the full punishment that sin deserves and crushed Him as if He had been the actual offender, and He tells you and me that if we will trust in Christ, if we receive Him as God's King and Savior sent to us by faith, if we will surrender our lives to Him, the merit, the value, the worth of His sacrifice will be given to you and you will be forgiven and adopted as a child of God and live forever with Him because Jesus died on the cross for you. If any of us would be forgiven, and receive the blessings of God, we must look with faith to Jesus Christ. **"Behold** – not the preacher, not the your good works you think will save you, not your religious rituals that you think will win favor with God, not your religious heritage -- but **the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** Look to the Lamb of God who saves sinners who look in faith to Him.

And don't miss this... it is God the Father who has provided the Lamb. That is the point. The sacrifice for sin could come from nowhere else but God. The sacrifice for our sin, for our transgression could be found nowhere else but God. Be astonished, amazed, that God would give His only Son. It had to be. Who else could satisfy and fulfill the Law we had broken in the way that it should be – in perfect obedience and with complete joy? Who else could offer His blood as the vindication of divine justice? The Lord must provide the sacrifice or there will be no forgiveness of sins.

Jesus came to bear the weight of sin of all in the world who would come to Him – get that now – not just the Jews but the sins of everyone in the world who would believe in Him. There is no race, no nationality, no ethnicity, no socio-economic status excluded. He is a Savior for everyone in the world who will come to Him in faith. He came to bear the weight of sin and take it away. Now listen, we know this to be true that nothing can be in two

places at once, right? So what that means is this, if I, being a believer in Jesus Christ know that all of my sin, all of my guilt, the crushing burden of all of my sin has been laid upon Him, then no debt of sin and no guilt can be upon me. Christ has taken it away. All of my guilt and indebtedness had been transferred to Christ and He has paid it all.

And notice that John says it in the present tense. He “takes away the sin.” That means that His sacrifice once offered is powerful forever. Oh get this now. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have a Savior who is as full of power as if He had been crucified for your sins in this very moment. He is now as able to save as He has ever been and there is no limit to the value of His sacrifice, no sin that He cannot take away. And the guilt of every sin of every believer is taken away, without exception. There is no sin too heinous, no wickedness too terrible, no habitual failure too often repeated, that it cannot be taken away by Jesus Christ. Oh, beloved, Behold the Lamb of God!

How can we fail to see Him? John would have, had it not been for the work of God’s grace in His heart. He goes on to say, **“This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’**(That’s a testimony to the Deity of Christ, to the truth that He is the Son of God, something of which John had become convinced. But how did that happen? He recalls what happened some 6 weeks earlier when he had baptized Jesus in the Jordan before Jesus went in the wilderness to be tempted. Watch this. ***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. 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.’”*** (John 1:30–33, ESV) John started His ministry to testify to the Lamb of God and when he began, he had no idea who that was. What faith. When John says that he did not know him, however, there is more to it than meets the eye. Jesus and John were cousins. They were related to one another. Jewish families in the ANE, they spent time together. He would have seen Jesus on many occasions and no doubt John knew Him as a righteous man, a faithful and God honoring man, but He would have missed His true identity altogether had it not been for God opening his eyes.

John came baptizing so that the Lamb of God would be revealed. And Jesus came out to be baptized by Him, to identify with sinners, and to be revealed as the Son of God, but John didn’t know it was He. In fact, Matthew tells us that when Jesus came to be baptized, John

balked. He knew the righteous character of Jesus as his cousin. Matthew says, ***“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.””*** (Matthew 3:13–17, ESV) It was then that the promise of God, ***‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’*** came to fruition for John. He had his eyes opened to see the true identity of the Lamb sent from God. Every sinner needs his eyes opened by God to see Jesus as He is and every one of us needs God to keep our eyes opened. Just as God did with John, Jesus does for all who come to believe in Him as Savior and Lord.

That’s what the statement – ***this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit*** – means. It is a broad, overarching phrase that includes the entire saving, sanctifying and empowering work of the Holy Spirit. Our great need is to behold Jesus for who He is. You must have eyes to see Him clearly and Christ is the One who with the baptism of the Holy Spirit makes our dead hearts alive, our blind eyes to see, our cold hearts to believe and keep on believing, who brings us into the family of God, who makes us a part of His kingdom, who makes you to be immersed in Him, immersed in the life of God, immersed in the new life in Him, immersed in forgiveness and holiness, immersed in His never-ending grace, and who does in reality what water baptism only illustrates.

Having beheld Jesus, John says these words, ***“And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”*** (John 1:34, ESV) John had done what he came to do, what God had commissioned him to do – to bear witness to Christ and he would do it for the rest of his life – pointing all who would hear to Jesus Christ.

The application of this text this morning is pretty simple, really. When we read this text, two things stand out as paramount among everything else. We must behold Jesus for ourselves and then we must proclaim to the world the good news of who Jesus is and what He came to be and do. We are sinners and He is God’s only Savior from sin, the only Lamb of God.

Jesus is not one among many saviors. He is the only Savior. I preach it because the Bible says it is so and because it is the reality of my experience, of my own life. It is, for me, preach Jesus, preach this truth, or preach nothing. As Paul said, ***“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”*** (1 **Corinthians 2:1–2, ESV**) And why did he say that? Because there is no hope outside of Jesus Christ. None at all. If our greatest need in this world and in the next is for the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation to God, to whom can we turn? Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – repent of your sin and believe in Him.

And having seen Him with eyes of faith, may we all come to the realization that there is nothing more important to proclaim than Him. Every Christian knows firsthand wonderful and remarkable truth about Jesus. Tell people what you know. Testify with John, with your words and with your life, that Jesus is the Son of God. That, above all else, is why you exist. Let me say that again... above all else, that is why you exist. That is why God has not translated you to heaven at the moment that you were saved. You can do everything in heaven that you are doing right now on this earth. You can worship and adore, magnify and glorify God, give praise to Christ for His glorious redemption and faithful love, everything except for proclaiming Christ to the lost and testifying to the worth among the nations. That we can only do now and it is the reason that we have been left upon this earth – to testify with our lives and with our words, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”

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