

John 1:19-28 "The Witness"

John 1:19-28 ¹⁹ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² 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?" ²³ He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." ²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, *but* among you stands One whom you do not know. ²⁷ *It is* He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Earlier in this gospel John the Baptist was introduced in such a way as to show the contrast between the true light, Jesus Christ, and the one who would testify to this light.

JOH 1:6-8 "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

This was to alleviate any confusion about John the Baptist's role in the redemptive plan of God. But as we come to our text this morning we begin to move past mere introductions and get up close and personal with this messenger from God and the circumstances surrounding the times in which he lived.

JOH 1:19 "Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was."

We need to understand what is happening here. The most powerful Jewish religious leaders in all of Israel have taken notice of John and have sent out an investigative group to learn more about this most unusual man.

But before we even get to this encounter between John and the group sent from Jerusalem we need to ask ourselves some questions. Why were they sent out? What would have motivated

such an encounter? Who is John the Baptist that anyone, least of whom the religious leaders in Jerusalem, would be interested in a preacher baptizing Jews in the Jordan?

Well, we're not told in this gospel. But we get a much clearer picture by going to the other gospels as they describe this person.

The first mention of John prior to his ministry is found in the gospel of Luke as God gives us the names of his parents and the circumstances surrounding his birth.

LUK 1:5-13 "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. 8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John."

The first thing we're told about John's parents is that his father is a priest who would have been of the tribe of Levi since it was the Levites who were in charge of the priestly duties in the temple.

What this means is that the group sent out from the leaders in Jerusalem to investigate this man baptizing in the Jordan, in all likelihood knew John's father, Zechariah, or at least knew of him since some of those sent out were Levites and priests themselves.

Word travels fast in relatively small communities and the Jewish community was a tight knit group who probably knew everyone else's business. Some of the leaders probably were aware of Zachariah's son who, to them, seemed a little odd.

Despite the fact that John had priestly connections through his father and was eligible to be a priest himself, his ministry didn't go through the regular channels. And yet, John seems to be acting in a

priestly way, as one who has authority to make the kinds of declarations he does.

MAT 3:1 "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

The religious leaders in Jerusalem have got to be wondering how this man can make such bold statements as it relates to the welfare of the nation of Israel. And they've got to be saying to themselves, "since we are the ones endowed with authority from God, and since we didn't sanction this man's ministry, who does he think he is telling anyone to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. What does he know that we don't?"

And so their curiosity is heightened to say the least. Add into the equation that the nation of Israel has been looking for someone to deliver them from the yoke of Rome and now you've got the potential for the common Jew to actually follow this man who comes in the name of God and preaching a message seemingly sent from God. This could undermine the power and authority of these religious leaders.

MAT 3:5 "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan."

This threatened the religious leaders of Israel. But there's more. John not only has a message which points to the end times before the coming of Messiah, he has certain physical characteristics which resemble another prophet of God.

This other prophet of God is described in 2Kings who addresses a King in Israel who has gone after false gods and has sent messengers out to consult with those gods because he has injured himself.

2KI 1:6-8 "A man came to meet us," they replied. "And he said to us, 'Go back to the king who sent you and tell him, "This is what the LORD says: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending men to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'" 7 The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?" 8 They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite."

Well, what are we told about the outward appearance of John the Baptist?

MAT 3:4 "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey."

This sounds like a wild man, doesn't it? Clothes of camel hair? His food was locusts and wild honey? Do you know how to obtain wild honey? In most cases you've got to fight off hordes of bees to get that stuff. I've got a feeling John was a wild man who would be intimidated by no one.

But what would be the attraction to someone who is described in physical terms like the prophet Elijah? Keep in mind that it has been almost 400 hundred years since there has been a prophet in Israel, the last one being Malachi.

In fact, it was Malachi who gave Israel the promise and the hope that Elijah would come back to them in the days just preceding the return of the Messiah.

MAL 4:5-6 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

The Jews were aware of this prophecy and now out of nowhere a man who is described as looking like Elijah with a similar temperament, as one who was not intimidated by anyone, and comes with a message of repentance because the kingdom of God is near.

You can imagine the excitement and the hope that maybe their deliverance is near as God is setting the stage for His return as He sets up His kingdom once again in Israel.

If the common people in Israel figured this out so did the religious leaders. And this is why the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.

JOH 1:20 "He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

The first part of verse 20 makes it clear that John had nothing to hide and was not going to be intimidated by this entourage representing the most important people in Israel. He confessed freely.

And by the way, the word confess that describes John's willingness to give answers to their questions is the Greek word *homologeō* and it means to say the same thing as another, to agree with. Well, what was he saying that was the same thing as another or agreeing with?

He was saying and agreeing with the prophets who had already spoken on the subject that the Messiah was to come into this world and that all men everywhere needed to repent as they turned to Him for their salvation. In other words, he was agreeing with the word of God.

John was not going to give these religious leaders his own opinion about the situation. He was going to tell them the truth of who God is and what His plan for Israel and the rest of the world is.

And so, he begins by telling them who he is not. "I am not the Christ." This makes it abundantly clear that his ministry and message of repentance was intrinsically tied to be that of the promised Messiah. The times were right and the conditions in Israel pointed to the possibility that Messiah was near.

And so, John wants to be up front that he is not the Messiah so as not to give anyone a false hope in himself. Now, had this been some of today's tele-evangelists the answer they give might be different as they seem to be consumed with the power and fame. But John will not do such a thing.

JOH 1:21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

Their first guess was that maybe John was the Christ. And by the way, whenever we use the word Christ it is the same term in Greek which is translated from the Hebrew word Messiah which means anointed.

And so both words are interchangeable. Whether we are discussing the Messiah or the Christ both titles point to the One who is anointed of God to serve as the One who will redeem men from the penalty of their sins.

And so, John says I am not that anointed one. And so the next set of questions. Are you Elijah? We've already seen why this question would have been posed. Elijah was promised to return to Israel.

Now, the question as to whether or not Elijah was to literally return to Israel is something we can't go into detail here. But there are those who subscribe to the idea that since Elijah was one of two people in all of history who did not taste death, (the other being Enoch), but was taken up bodily to meet the Lord, that it is certainly possible that the prophecy of Malachi could be addressing Elijah.

MAL 4:5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

That great and dreadful day speaks of judgment, not of coming into the world before the birth of Christ, who did not come to judge the world but to save it. On the other hand, the time in which Revelation speaks is a promised judgment surrounding the second return of Christ, who at that time does come to judge.

But getting back to John the Baptist, there is still a connection to Elijah that God has given to John. Jesus Himself refers to this.

MAT 17:10-13 "The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" 11 Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. 12 But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13 Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

Now, Jesus was not teaching that John the Baptist is the reincarnation of Elijah. Elijah is Elijah and John the Baptist is John the Baptist. But Jesus is referring to John in this way to describe their similar ministries and the power of the Spirit working in both in similar ways. And this is precisely what the angel told John's father before John was born.

LUK 1:17 "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And so, despite the fact that Jesus can allude to John as fulfilling the coming of Elijah, John can say to the Levites and Priests, when they ask if he's Elijah, "no, I'm not Elijah."

"Well, if you're not Elijah, are you the prophet?" they ask in verse 21.

Who are they talking about here? Why does John not ask which prophet? Well, because John knew which prophet they were talking about. And this prophet would be the one spoken of in the Scriptures relating to the Messiah. In fact, Moses speaks of this prophet.

DEU 18:15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him."

Who would be a prophet like Moses? Well, it would be a prophet who served in the same capacity as did Moses who was not just a prophet, but the mediator between God and Israel. This coming prophet would also be mediator between God and men. This prophet would be the Messiah despite the fact that these Jews confronting John would have viewed this prophet as one who was special but not necessarily the Messiah.

And so John emphatically says, no, I'm not the prophet, knowing who that prophet had to be; the Messiah Himself. And keep in mind that the Messiah did have three major roles when He came into this world; those of Prophet, Priest and King. He fulfilled all three.

JOH 1:22 "Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

Well, their interrogation is going nowhere fast. "Okay, if you're not Elijah, and you're not the prophet, who in the world are you and why are you baptizing people with the kind of authority reserved only for priests or prophets?"

Well, here's your answer. In the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (JOH 1:23)

What kind of answer is that? Well, it's the only answer that makes sense biblically. John is saying that my ministry is tied to Scripture. I am the one who has been called by God, according to

the prophet Isaiah, to announce the entrance of the Messiah as He begins His earthly ministry of redemption.

As in preparation for a King coming from a far-away land he was creating a path through the desert and making that path straight so that all will know that this King has arrived. That was John's role.

But the Jews still didn't get it; thus the next question.

JOH 1:24-25 "Now some Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

Notice here how the Jews connected baptism to a ministry associated to these three people, the Christ, Elijah and the prophet.

All of these people were very special in the minds of the Jews. And by this question they are saying that they recognized the legitimacy of baptism through these people, "but John you're a nobody who has not received your authority from we who are the legitimate leaders of Israel. What gives you the right to practice baptism which is reserved for these people?"

John doesn't even entertain their question. He's not concerned that they don't recognize his authority. He knows where his authority comes from and nothing will deter him from his ministry.

But it should be pointed out that John's baptism is not the equivalent of Christian baptism. John's baptism involved Jewish ceremonial rites of sprinkling or pouring water on people to designate cleansing and washing from unclean things associated with sin.

If John had come to the Jordan practicing a religious rite which was out of accord with the Scriptures the Jews would not have asked if he were the Christ, or Elijah or the Prophet. They simply would have recognized him as an apostate and a heretic. But because his baptism was a legitimate expression of repentance found in the Scriptures they didn't question that; only, does he have authority to practice it?

His baptism was not unlike the washings we find in Leviticus. For example, in regards to the sacrificial system the priest had several requirements before he could go forward with his priestly duties. And remember, John was of a priestly line.

NUM 19:7-8 "After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. 8 The man who burns it [the sacrifice] must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening."

The process of ceremonial washing and bathing are terms in Hebrew which are translated over to the Greek as baptism. Back in Numbers we see a couple of different modes for these washings or baptisms.

NUM 19:18-19 "Then a man who is ceremonially clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there. He must also sprinkle anyone who has touched a human bone or a grave or someone who has been killed or someone who has died a natural death. 19 The man who is clean is to sprinkle the unclean person on the third and seventh days, and on the seventh day he is to purify him. The person being cleansed must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and that evening he will be clean."

In this passage we have terms like sprinkle, together with wash and bathe which infers pouring. All of these terms express legitimate ways of becoming ceremonially clean through washing or baptism according to Levitical law.

And so, John could very well have been in the Jordan taking people before the Lord as they confessed their sins and was ceremonially washing them or baptizing them as he sprinkled them or poured water over their heads.

And so, when asked by the Pharisees why he is baptizing or conducting ceremonial washings, according to biblical law, John simply contrasts who he is with the One whose ministry is far beyond his own, and therefore accomplishes infinitely more.

JOH 1:26-28 "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." 28 This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing."

As intriguing as John the Baptist was to the Jews, and as provocative as he would end up being to the religious leaders because of his uncompromising attitude, his was a ministry which

was always designed to elevate the Messiah whose sandals he considered himself not worthy to untie.

This should have spoken volumes to the Jewish leaders. This should have prompted them to ask, where can we find the One you proclaim as the King traveling this highway which leads Him to us?

But John knew their intentions. In fact, this is why he confronted these leaders the way he did.

MAT 3:7-12 "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

This was a scathing indictment against these leaders of Israel who claimed to be God's representatives and yet were whitened tombs filled with dead men's bones, as Jesus put it on one occasion.

And yet, this message of hope went out to these people as well. They, like us, have the responsibility to embrace this Messiah and we know that some of them did; Nicodemus being one of the likely Pharisees and teachers who embraced Christ after His resurrection.

John was a true messenger of Christ. And he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness and yet we too are called to be voices who bear witness to the Word who became flesh. It is the Word in our hearts which should motivate our voices to tell this world who can cleanse us from sin.

Remember, it was the voice of the Father who claimed that He was pleased with His Son.

MAT 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

May we show the world that we too are pleased and love the Son who has given us life and has cleansed us from the penalty of our sin. Let's be those voices in a wilderness of sin where our voices may be heard in not just what we say but also what we do in living to the honor and glory of our God.

And may we rejoice that the Holy Spirit of God has caused us to hear the voice of our Lord and given us the gift of faith as we responded to our Lord Jesus Christ's voice to come unto Him.

REV 3:20-22 "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. 21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

REV 21:3-7 "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

Praise God!