

John's Testimony  
John 1:19-34

John the Apostle pays quite a bit of attention to John the Baptist in this passage, but, let's face it – he leaves out lots of things that we would reasonably expect to be here. Both Matthew and Mark, for example, tell us what John looked like. He wore clothing made of camel's hair tied with a leather belt – in other words, he looked like an Old Testament prophet. John's gospel doesn't mention any of that at all.

Both Matthew and Luke go into much greater detail about John's teaching – how he urged all kinds of people to repent from their wicked ways and to be baptized, ceremonially washed as an indication of their repentance. John's gospel gives us none of this information.

But if John the Baptist is interesting to us, how much more compelling did the people of his day find him. After all, it had been over 400 years since Malachi, the last true prophet of God had spoken God's Word to God's people. So it's no wonder that the religious leaders came to see John in verse 19. Malachi himself had said that Elijah the prophet would return before the Messiah appeared. Was that who John was?

John said no, but that's something else strange about this story. For the truth is that Jesus would disagree with John. For Matthew's gospel records Jesus as saying that John was in fact the one Malachi was talking about, the Elijah-type prophet who would seek to turn the hearts of the fathers and the children back toward each other, the prophet who would prepare the people for the great and dreadful day of the Lord. So, given what Jesus said, why did John give the answer that he did? Did John just not know who he was? Just who was John the Baptist, anyway?

Of course, the leaders of God's people had still another theory about John. All the way back in Deuteronomy, Moses had said this: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear." And so naturally they wondered – could John the Baptist be the great prophet Moses had predicted?

Again, John denied this. But why? Well, think about how important he thought he was. For John, all that he said and all that he did just wasn't important in comparison to the One Who would come after him, One who was so holy and so powerful that John didn't feel worthy even to stoop down and untie His shoes for Him.

Now, perhaps, we can see why both Johns give us so little information about John the Baptist. For both Johns, the point of this whole passage is not for us to think about John the Baptist. No, the point is for us to turn our attention toward Jesus.

For that is the only thing that John the Baptist would admit about himself – that he was the one that Isaiah predicted would cry out in the wilderness, the one who would urge people to make straight the way of the Lord. Just as the envelope isn't more important than the letter and just as the sports announcer isn't more important than the players, so the herald isn't more important than the One Whose coming he announces.

Okay, so Who did John say was coming? What is John's testimony about Jesus? Well, John confesses two times in today's passage that he didn't really know Who Jesus was at first. Now, that doesn't mean that John knew nothing at all about Jesus. After all, Luke explains how Jesus and John were cousins. Matthew explains that when Jesus came to John to be baptized, John at first refused, because he already knew that Jesus was more important than him, and thus that Jesus was the One Who really should be baptizing John.

But let's face it – there were lots of people who had known how important Jesus was all His life. Mary and the shepherds knew it at the time of his birth because angels told them. Joseph knew it because of his dreams. Once Jesus became an adult, the crowds knew that He could do miracles. Jesus' disciples would come to respect Him as a great teacher, and even to expect Him to rule as Messiah on earth.

But none of that knowledge, in the last analysis, was sufficient for people to put their faith in Jesus. Sure, the crowds had seen him heal the sick and raise the dead, but that didn't stop them from asking for Him to be crucified. The disciples had seen Him calm the seas and even walk on the water, but that didn't keep them from abandoning Him in His hour of greatest need.

And this, of course, shouldn't surprise us. The Old Testament people of God had a long history of ignoring even miracle-working prophets like Elijah if what those prophets said disagreed with what they wanted to believe. Elijah had called down fire from heaven, but that just made Jezebel all the more determined to kill him. Just knowing that Jesus wielded miracle-working power didn't make people trust Him.

It still isn't sufficient today, is it? Aren't there lots of people who call themselves Christians, people who are happy to admit the facts of Jesus' life, but who still live lives focused on themselves and their own desires? No, just knowing how important Jesus is, how special Jesus is isn't enough to change anyone's soul.

No, as today's passage makes clear, it wasn't until after Jesus was baptized that John caught a grander glimpse of the real truth. For all four gospels agree that on that occasion the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. But today's passage goes into greater detail about this sign. John says that God had given him advance notice that this would happen as a sign that Jesus was in fact to be specially blessed with God's presence, filled with the Holy Spirit in an unusually abundant way.

But even such amazing news wasn't completely unprecedented. After all, several of the Old Testament Judges were said to be filled with the Spirit of God. It was because the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon Samson that he was able to kill a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. In the same way, the Spirit of the Lord came upon King Saul and gave him the courage and power to defeat the Ammonites. No, just being filled with the Holy Spirit didn't mean that Jesus was anything more than another powerful warrior or prophet.

And again, just knowing that Jesus was specially filled with the Holy Spirit isn't enough to change our lives today. So what if Jesus was holy, set apart from our sins? So what if Jesus had a specially close relationship with God? How does that help sinners like me?

But you see, Jesus didn't just receive the Holy Spirit like other people had. No, all four gospels agree on this point: Jesus would be the One Who would baptize others with the Holy Spirit. Now, that was something new. Many people throughout history, such as John the Baptist himself, had baptized people with water, urging them to repentance and faith. But only Jesus could go further. Only Jesus could pour out the Spirit of God, promising a fuller, richer relationship between God and His people than had ever existed before.

But what human being can even say with certainty what God's Spirit will do? So what mere man could possibly be responsible for directing the movements of the Spirit of God?

Well, it turns out that Jesus was no mere man after all. For on the day John baptized Him, God the Father Himself spoke from Heaven. On the day of Jesus' baptism, people heard the voice of God directly, just as they had on the day that God gave Moses and the Israelites the Ten Commandments from the top of Mt. Sinai. The other three gospels record the very words God the Father spoke: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In this gospel, we hear the same thing, but in the words of John the Baptist: "And I have seen and bore record, or have testified that this is the Son of God."

What does that mean? How can Jesus be the Son of God? Well, let's look at that quote from Isaiah that we read responsively this morning, a quote that can be found, by the way, in every one of the four gospels. Whose way did John say he was preparing? The way of the Lord. And in the same passage, Isaiah goes on to say that in the desert a highway for our God should be prepared. In short, by applying this quote to himself, and by later pointing to Jesus as the One who was coming after him, John was saying in no uncertain terms that the man Jesus was, in fact, the Lord God Himself.

That is the truth, and there can be no room for doubt or disagreement. The prophets of the Old and New Testaments agree that Jesus is the Lord. God the Father Himself spoke from Heaven, just as He did on the day He gave the Ten Commandments from the top of Mt. Sinai.

But that's just the problem, isn't it? For even after the people heard the voice of God Himself, 40 days hadn't gone by before the people set out to break all of them. They heard the voice of the Lord alright, but that didn't stop them from making the golden calf.

So what if we know that Jesus isn't just important and holy. So what if we know that Jesus is actually divine, possessing all power in Heaven and on Earth? How can that be good news for sinners like us? Do we have any less reason than the people at Mt. Sinai to tremble in fear at the presence of God? Have we done any better job of keeping God's perfect law of love?

So what would it take for them, or for us to trust God, to follow His law because we want to and not because we are simply afraid of punishment? What would it take for the people truly to bow the knee to God?

It would take the last thing that John the Baptist said about Jesus - that He is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. Now think about that. How could a lamb take away anyone's sin? In the Old Testament there was only one way - by serving as a sacrifice. In countless Old Testament rituals, animals were killed and their blood was spilled so that human beings could be restored to a right relationship with God.

And that is precisely what John is saying about Jesus. Yes, He is the most important, special person Who ever lived. Yes He is filled with the Holy Spirit, having a specially close relationship with God. In fact, Jesus was the Son of God, fully divine in a way that none of us can understand. But it was this special, spotless, divine Son of God Who was willing to come to us, not as a king on a throne, but as a lamb on an altar. It was this Jesus Who chose lay down His life for us that we might live before God.

No wonder John the Baptist didn't want to spend much time talking about himself. All he wanted to do was to point all of us toward Jesus, who sacrificed all He was and all He had, and for sinners like you and me. Let us look to the cross of Christ and be saved.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross