

The Voice in the Wilderness

John 1:19-51 (02)

Downton Abbey is a popular British television series, now on its fourth season, is about life in the years leading up to World War I. I started watching this series backwards and was confused. I missed the significance of the series until I started from the beginning. Reading John's Gospel without understanding the OT will lessen our appreciation for the significance of the Fourth Gospel.

John the Baptist and Jesus

1. John 1:19-2:11 describes Jesus's first week of ministry (first "week" of the new creation)
2. John 1:19-51 contains one OT quotation but up to six OT allusions
3. John 1:19-51 contains five messianic titles for Jesus
4. John 1:6-8 is now explained more fully in John 1:19-51
5. John 1:19-51 describes the need to be a **witnessing** disciple
6. John the Baptizer's wilderness setting reveals Israel is still in 'exile'
7. John the Baptizer's quote from Isaiah 40 contains exodus imagery (typology)
8. John's baptism was designed to reveal Jesus to Israel (1:31)
9. John's baptism was temporary and pointed to greater realities (Christian baptism)
10. Jacob's Genesis 28 'ladder dream' is fulfilled in Jesus Christ

I. Witness Boldly Under Pressure (1:19-34)

A. John announces the New Exodus (1:19-28)

1. Refuse glory for yourself (1:19-23)

- a. All four Gospels identify John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. In the history of salvation, John the Baptizer's function was to reveal Jesus.
- b. The passage begins by immediately telling us that a certain representative group of Jewish religious authorities were sent to investigate John the Baptizer. They were sent from Jerusalem to the remote wilderness area where John was ministering near the Jordan River. Their job is to find out who he is and why he is preaching a message of judgment and repentance as he called people into the wilderness to receive a new sign of baptism.
- c. To be fair to the Jewish religious leaders, it was their duty to ask questions. **D.A. Carson points out** that it would have been irresponsible of the leaders if they had failed to check him out. Naturally they would be concerned because John's ministry was drawing large crowds in strange places (wilderness). Their questions are understandable because they too are concerned about ritual purification (associated with water) and are fully aware that the Scriptures prophesied the coming of Messiah. During the days and time of John the Baptizer the people of Israel were once again living under foreign oppression, but their messianic hopes were alive. During this time there were many other people making prophetic claims of messianic fulfillment which explains in part why the Jews were concerned with this mysterious person preaching in the wilderness. **Kostenberger notes**, "Messianic expectations were widespread in early first-century Palestine. Many Jews waited for the greater Son of David predicted to be coming. However, people were not necessarily united in their expectations, nor were these necessarily in keeping with scriptural predictions."
- d. So the Jewish religious leaders send an investigative delegation to find out **two things** about John the Baptizer: **1. Who are you? and 2. What are you doing? All of their questions center on "End-time" prophetic figures that influenced their thinking and beliefs.**
- e. When they meet him they ask three questions. **First**, are you the Christ (Messiah, Anointed One)? He emphatically replied, "**No** I am not the Christ." From our study of John's Prologue we already know that John the Baptist is not the light (1:6-8). **Second**, are you Elijah? He replied, "**No.**" **Third**, are you the prophet? Here they are referring to the well-known passage Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 15:15, 18.
- f. At this point it appears that the religious authorities are involved in an innocent fact finding mission, however their questions reveal a skepticism that will be further revealed when Jesus begins his ministry. John the Baptist was preparing to testify for Jesus. He never seeks glory for himself and neither should we when we testify for Jesus.
- g. **Let's us return briefly to the question about Elijah.** John the Baptist said he was not Elijah, but Jesus said he was Elijah (Matthew 11:14; 17:12; Mark 9:13). Which is it? There are several

reasons why the Jewish people made a connection between John the Baptist and Elijah. **First**, Elijah never died, but was miraculously taken up into heaven (**2 Kings 2:11**). **Furthermore**, **Malachi 4:5** prophesied that Elijah would come again before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Add to this the fact that the angel Gabriel told John's father, "and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). False prophets often dressed like Elijah, probably to sound more convincing (Zechariah 13:4). Furthermore, John the Baptist did dress and act a lot like Elijah. He preached a strong message of judgment and repentance in the wilderness (Matthew 3:4 with 2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:7-12 and Luke 3:7-17). So why did John the Baptizer deny being Elijah? Here are two simple reasons: **First**, he was not literally Elijah so when he said "No" he was not lying. **Second and perhaps more convincing**, the Baptizer denied being "Elijah" to counter the expectation popular in his day that the same Elijah who escaped death in a fiery chariot would return in like spectacular manner (Kostenberger).

- h. **At this point the Jewish delegation may have grown a bit impatient, Who are you then?** Perhaps they were shocked when John the Baptizer quoted from the prophecy of **Isaiah 40:3** and said, *"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."*
- i. **To understand and appreciate the significance of what John just said, let us stop briefly and consider the historical context of Isaiah 40:3.** Isaiah 40 is a key turning point in Isaiah's prophecy. After 39 chapters of about failure and judgment, chapter 40 begins a "new book" in Isaiah and turns to comfort and salvation. Israel's historical situation during the days of Isaiah was actually very similar to the days of John the Baptist. God's people were **barren**, and **spiritually** they were definitely in the **wilderness** – yet God come to meet us in our barrenness. He did this at Mt. Sinai. On one level, Isaiah 40:3 "prepare a way for the Lord" was a common way of saying, "Prepare the road for the arrival of a great dignitary." In Ezekiel 9-11 the Lord abandoned Jerusalem, but he promised to return one day – now the day was coming and the glory of the Lord was about to be revealed in Jesus and John the Baptizer was sent by God to prepare Israel for her approaching Messiah. John the Baptizer preached "**repentance**" as the proper spiritual condition to receive Jesus.
- j. **The language of Isaiah 40** looks back to the first exodus from Egypt and promised that captive Israel would one day be freed from Babylonian captivity. Isaiah prophesied that the release from Babylonian captivity would be another new exodus, but Isaiah also prophesied beyond that return from one land to another – to a spiritual exodus to be led by Messiah that would culminate in a new heavens and a new earth. **Even during the days of Isaiah the "exodus model" of redemption was used for more than the exodus from Egypt or the return from Babylon. The "exodus motif" was a significant historical event that modeled and anticipated the final return of the Lord.** John is revealing that the coming of Jesus is the beginning of a New and Final Exodus from spiritual barrenness to spiritual life. God was now ready to show His glory in sending Jesus into this world. **When John quotes from Isaiah 40:3 he was announcing that the Messiah and his redemption will bring about a new exodus in which God's glory will be revealed** (Kostenberger). God is ready to deliver His people. When John quotes Isaiah 40:3 all of us should come to the conclusion that just as God redeemed his people from slavery during the days of Moses, God is about to act again.

2. **Know that John's baptism points to greater realities (1:24-28)**

- a. **Keep in mind that the more John the Baptist speaks, the more of Jesus we see.** This is in keeping with what he later said of himself in relation to Jesus, ***"I must decrease, but he must increase."*** **Kostenberger writes**, "At its very heart, the purpose of John's baptism and ministry is described as being bound up with revealing Jesus' true identity to Israel (1:31).
- b. Baptism (or ceremonial washing) was not entirely new to the Jewish people. Some Pharisees and other devoted Jewish people practiced self-baptism from their understanding of **Ezekiel 36:25**. This passage was used to justify daily baptism / ceremonial washings, but it was administered to oneself. **Ezekiel 36:25** says, *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*
- c. We could even say that John's baptism symbolized both judgment and salvation. Baptism was administered to Gentile converts to Judaism, but John was calling (and limiting) baptism to Israelites! This would have been **highly offensive** to many of the religious leaders.
- d. However, for now, just notice that John the Baptist did not fully explain the significance of what he was doing; he shifted to focus back to Jesus. He just continued to testify that Jesus Christ was greater than he. John's voice in the wilderness was a temporary voice meant to announce the coming of Jesus. We too can learn from this as well.

B. Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29-34)

1. Explain how Jesus can forgive sin (1:29-30)

- a. This confession about Jesus being God's Lamb is perhaps so common to us today, that we may fail to notice just how shocking and confusing this would sound in the ears of the Jewish leaders. **First**, in the Old Testament a lamb was not an animal used for sin offerings, but here John says that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin! **Second**, Jewish people would be happy to hear that Jesus was the Lamb of God for Israel, but John says that Jesus is the Lamb of God for the world. **In John 1:14, John already gave us an important clue about sacrifice.** Here in verse 29 we encounter the second clue. It is true that God's Lamb will take away sin, but John the Baptist may not have fully understood this.
- b. **John 2:2; 4:10. The revelation of Jesus was not limited to the nation of Israel, but for the world** (that includes our enemies the Romans!). How can this be? They must have thought that John the Baptist was interpreting ancient prophecy **wrongly**.

2. Rejoice because the Holy Spirit anointed the Son of God (1:31-34)

- a. John and Jesus were cousins, they knew each other. John's statement in verse 31, "*I myself did not know him*" must be referring to the real identity of Jesus as the Eternal Word become flesh. This would have to be revealed somehow to John the Baptist. John the Baptizer states the purpose for why he was baptizing in the wilderness – to reveal Jesus to Israel. God revealed to John the Baptist that when he saw the Spirit of God descend upon one of the persons he would baptize, and then he would know - this is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah.
- b. We know that throughout the Old Testament the Spirit was sometime given temporarily to unique individuals called by God for a special task. What is significant here is that at the time Jesus was baptized, John witnessed the Spirit descend upon Jesus, **but the Spirit remained with Jesus.** *This word "remain" will become a key word to explain Christian discipleship in John (remain = abide).* Just as the anointing of the Spirit remained with Jesus true disciples remain with Jesus.
- c. All of this points to the permanent baptism of the Holy Spirit. The permanent dwelling of the Holy Spirit first given to Jesus was prophesied long ago throughout the Old Testament as "**characteristic**" of the age of Messiah (**Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 36:26-27; 37:14; Joel 2:28-32**). In the Old Testament, God promised that the Spirit would be given in the last days. In the coming Jesus and the subsequent giving of the Spirit the last days of restoration have arrived. In Jesus Christ the long exile is over and the great exodus-restoration of salvation has begun.
- d. **It is now time for John the Baptist to fade away from the scene.** John the Baptist functioned perfectly, like a supporting cast member, whose task is to support the star of the show. Like him, let us stay focused on witnessing faithfully to Jesus Christ as the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

II. If You Follow Jesus Introduce Others to Jesus (1:35-51)

A. Invite people to be followers of Jesus (1:35-40)

1. Start with people you know (1:35-37)

- a. At this point, John **does not tell us how** the Jewish authorities responded to his testimony about Jesus and we witness the first disciples of Jesus.
- b. Before He ascended, Jesus announced the **Great Commission** in **Matthew 28:18-20**.

2. Welcome all who come in faith in Jesus (1:38-42)

- a. The wonderful words of Jesus in **verse 39**, "**Come and you will see**" is a beautiful invitation from Jesus. Jesus gives the invitation to these covenant seekers of truth, "Come and you will see" the glory that I will reveal. Jesus extends a personal invitation to have a personal saving relationship of faith in Him and with Him. When Andrew heard about this, he told his brother Simon Peter, "We have found **the Messiah, the Christ**." They were convinced they had encountered the Son of God knew something big in God's redemptive plan was about to burst on the scene (even though their idea how God will accomplish salvation is not yet understood).
- b. Jesus welcomed them, not because they had perfect faith, but because they had faith. We know that these disciples of Jesus had an incomplete understanding of who the Messiah was to be, but Jesus did not correct them at this point because He was going to reveal to them what kind of Messiah he really was. Followers of Jesus should extend the same invitation to anyone and

everyone about the need to follow Christ. Jesus did not require perfect knowledge of who He was.

B. Jesus is the New Bethel (1:43-51) [Background is Genesis 28]

1. Jesus invites you to be His lifelong follower (1:43-48)

- a. To be a follower of Jesus Christ does not mean you have to begin with all the answers to your questions about the Christian Faith or knowledge of the Bible. By faith, you begin a relationship of forgiveness with Jesus. Christian commitment is not like having a part time hobby. Once you say "Yes" to Jesus you should remain His lifelong follower. Nathanael **sarcastically** commented, "What good could ever come from that little insignificant town!" More could be said about Nathanael's comment but he represents a different kind of skepticism and doubt than the Jewish religious leaders. Their doubt hardened their heart to reject Jesus, but Nathanael's honest doubt led him to quickly embrace Jesus as Messiah
- b. **Interesting, notice what Jesus says in verse 47.** Nathanael is still in a state of "honest doubt" and look what Jesus says about him. That last phrase, "**Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!**" This is actually a profound statement for a few reasons. **First** of all it connects to the rest of what Jesus says to Nathanael. **Second**, the word "**deceit**" (Greek *dolos*) is the same word used in **Genesis 27:35-36** to describe Jacob (later renamed Israel). It is as if Jesus is saying to Nathanael, "**Look, Israel without a trace of Jacob left in him!**" This attitude was sharply different not only with Jacob of old, but also with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (*dolos* is used to describe them in Matthew 26:4; Mark 14:1). Nathanael becomes "a symbol of (true) Israel coming to God."

2. Jacob's dream is fulfilled in Jesus (1:49-51; Genesis 28:12)

- a. Nathanael responds with two important titles, "*You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.*" Jesus makes an astounding promise to Nathanael. Because you believed you will see greater things than these. This statement is explained in our last verse today, "*You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*"
- b. Nathanael stepped out in faith on the basis of Jesus' supernatural display of knowledge. Jesus is promising that he and the other disciples will see greater things which far surpass the vision of Jacob the patriarch. Jesus is clearly making a connection back to Genesis 28:12 (as well as Daniel 7). **In Genesis 28 begins** with Jacob being sent away from the Land of Promise by his father Isaac. **At this point in Jacob's life he was not exactly a good model of someone who was faithfully following the Lord in his life. Genesis 28:12 says, *And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!* Genesis goes on to say, "*The LORD stood above him*" (28:13).**
- c. To help you begin to understand and appreciate what happened in Genesis 28, think first about the **Tower of Babel incident**. The Tower of Babel story represents sinful humanity who tried to reach heaven on their own. However, Jacob's dream teaches us that the only way we can ever gain access to God in heaven is if God takes the initiative and comes down to us. **At the Tower of Babel God came down in judgment, but in Jacob's dream God came down in grace.** This is what God did for Jacob in his dream. He saw angels descending and ascending on a ladder (or perhaps a ziggurat / stone staircase), up and down from heaven to earth. The dream symbolized God's special presence in the life of Jacob, confirming His promises first given to Abraham. The place where Jacob lay sleeping on earth became the access point between heaven and earth because of God's grace. It became the gate or entrance to heaven (symbolizing open communication between heaven and earth). This is why Jacob said what he said when he awoke in the morning, "***Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven"*** (Genesis 28:16-17). *He called the name of that place Bethel. Bethel means "house of God" (verse 19).*
- d. Ed Clowney writes, "**Bethel stands between the curse of Babel and the blessing of Pentecost.**" **The God came down to Jacob in grace long ago is the Lord who came down to be born of Mary. Jesus is the New Bethel, the place where God is revealed, where heaven and earth, God and humanity, meet** (Carson). Now in Christ, we have uninterrupted communion with the Father.

Are following Jesus by using your voice to witness for Him?