

Behold the Lamb of God

John 1:19–34, Part One

This morning we move into the first of the two major divisions of the Gospel of John, often called the Book of Signs. The first half, roughly, of the Gospel records Jesus revealing himself as God through both word and miraculous signs. (The 2nd section is called the Book of Glory as we see the Son glorified in the saving work of his death for our sin, according to the Scripture, his burial, and his resurrection on the third day, according to the Scripture.) We have moved out of the prologue where all the seeds have been sown for everything that we are about to see unfold before us.

One of the layers running through John's Gospel can be called *Jesus on Trial*. *Jesus on trial*. That describes repeated confrontations with the religious leaders who question him, trying to trip him up, trying to find reasons to discredit and dismiss him. This series of increasingly hostile confrontations ends ultimately with their false accusations and demand for his execution before Pilate. John's writing style, under the authority of the Holy Spirit, displays them as the primary antagonists to Christ, and he introduces them immediately after the prologue. We will discover how disoriented people can be to God and their fundamental need of him. We need to be aware that these religious leaders with hearts that are far from God are symbolic stand-ins for every sinner in unbelief and rebellion against God. Then with that, we begin the book of Signs. Follow as I read and this encounter with John the Baptist unfolds. **John 1:19–29** — ¹⁹ And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² 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?" 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." ²⁴ (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵ They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷ even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

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! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with

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water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”³³ 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.’³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

PRAY

There are three parties involved in this encounter with John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

1. A group of religious leaders, sent from their higher-up leaders, the Pharisees, in Jerusalem. They are professional ministers who study the scripture, but demonstrate that they do not know the God of the scriptures; they are disoriented to him, looking for the God who does what they want him to do.
2. John the Baptist, of course, who is the last of the Old Testament prophets, fulfilling his assignment to reveal that the Messiah, the Lamb of God, has come. He is preparing the way for the Messiah by powerfully calling people to repent and live holy lives, and he is baptizing people in the area west of the Jordan.
3. The day after the encounter with the religious leaders Jesus himself approaches John where he is baptizing. We have no recorded words from Jesus in this encounter, but we have the Baptist pointing to him, proclaiming him as the Messiah, the Lamb of God, who fulfills all the Old Testament imagery, and takes away sin.

Let’s begin by looking at the religious leaders, the priests and Levites. They are sent from the Jews, the Pharisees, in Jerusalem to investigate John the Baptist. John will often use the phrase, *the Jews*, to designate the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who oppose Jesus. It is not always the case, but frequently so. The fact that they are investigating, John is not unusual in and of itself. The religious leaders were supposed to maintain the purity of Israel’s worship and provide guidance to God’s people on what was authentic and what was in error. So they are on a fact-finding mission about this fiery prophet who preaches in out-of-the-way places, wears odd clothes, and has a peculiar diet.

While investigations of this manner were not unusual, we need to know that in 1st Century Palestine, people were highly primed with messianic expectations. There has been 400 years of silence since the last prophet Malachi. Since Malachi things have changed dramatically for the Jewish nation. Foremost among the changes is that Rome has conquered much of the world and certainly rules over Palestine and the Jewish people, though Rome allows them limited latitude to govern their religious

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affairs as they wish. Going back to Moses and the Law, they know that God will send his Messiah to rule righteously over his people. Rome's uncharitable boot on the neck of the Jews has led them look for, and desire a Messiah who going to end Roman rule over them and give them back their autonomy to live life as they want. They have become disoriented to the kingdom of God and are looking for a God who will order the world according to the dreams and desires that they have. Well, some things never change. That's the same God most of the world is looking for now.

Now let's get to the encounter. When they get to John, their opening salvo is, "Who are you?" Built into that simple question is likely a lot of baggage. We hear you have some sort of religious message, but you have not cleared it through us the religious leaders. Everyone is expecting and hoping for the Messiah to come. They don't ask it out right, but the Baptist understands it is implicit in their investigation: Are you the Messiah?

John immediately answers the question they did not ask out loud, but is driving the investigation. He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." **Christ** is the Greek word for Anointed One, or Messiah. He is immediately faithful to his assignment to point away from himself to Christ. He allows for no confusion about his assignment and robs no glory from Christ.

Their second question continues to reveal their search for the Messiah, however misguided or disoriented they are to who the Messiah is, and what he will do. "What then? Are you Elijah?" If that seems like an off-the-wall question to go to a random prophet, it's not. But in the 21st Century, if we are not as familiar with the Old Testament as we need to be, our thought may be, "Why this focus on Elijah?" The last paragraph of the last prophet before the 400 years of silence told of another prophet God would send who would prepare the way for the Messiah and that prophet would come as Elijah. **Malachi 4:5-6** — ⁵ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. **Malachi 3:1** tells us his assignment is to prepare the way before the Messiah. The statement that he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers is not just a statement of family reconciliation. It carries that weight, but far more it points to the healing and peace of the Kingdom of God as a whole when the Messiah comes. All the fractures and brokenness of the human heart because of the fall into sin and healed and the vertical relationship with God, and horizontal relationships are healed and restored by the Messiah's work.

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Now the question of Elijah is interesting in light of the fact that he has been gone for about 900 years at this point. Does Malachi imply Elijah will be reincarnated? No, we know from the whole of scripture that there is no reincarnation. Life begins at conception of sperm and egg. At that moment, a human soul in a human body comes into being, created in God's image, male or female. That life is lived for however long God ordains. Then it is appointed for man to die once, and after that the judgment — **Hebrews 9:27**. There are no go-arounds, no do-overs based on how you did this time. We are embodied souls, and ensouled bodies created in God's image according to his good design, and we will give account to him for how we lived the life he gave. So they aren't thinking Elijah is making a come back.

The prophet Elijah's name became short hand for all the aspects of his prophetic office. The Roman emperor Julius Caesar defined that ruling Office, an eventually dozens of Roman rulers became known as Caesar, even though that was Julius Caesar's family name. Long after Julius was dead, people still talked about Caesar and understood that that meant everything about the Emperor's authority in Rome. In the same way, Elijah described his office, his power, his spirit, and his authority. Malachi is saying that someone with the spirit and power and authority of Elijah is coming to prepare the Messiah's way.

The Baptist says he is not Elijah. The first part of Matthew 11, Jesus says the Baptist is Elijah who has come to prepare Christ's way. Why John's denial? Either John is seeking to dispel the idea that Elijah can be re-incarnated, so he says "no," or he does not fully grasp the prophetic mantle he has been given. Either of these are plausible explanations, and if you want to explore further, that sounds like a good topic for Theology Thursday, which we will endeavor to do more frequently during the summer months while community groups are on hiatus.

The religious leaders continue with their questions:

Are you the Prophet? This is a figure like Moses prophesied in Deuteronomy 18:15–18, who would speak God's word to them. Answer: No.

When you put everything together that they expect in the Messiah and that they are seeking in their questioning, we see they have some correct views, and some inadequate understanding about the Messiah. The Jewish concept of the Messiah at this time involved a king who would rule on the

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throne of David, and a priest Messiah. They were thinking of a prophet like Moses, who would continue to speak God's word to them. So their picture of the Messiah was fractured, and that some were looking for a prophet, some a priest, and some a king. They did not know or understand that Jesus the messiah was coming to fill all of those offices, becoming the incarnate word of God in his office of prophet, bringing them to an end, the sacrificial system that priests overall when he became the great high priest, and offered himself, I would take a seat on the throne of David forever as King through the power and authority of his resurrection from the dead. This is who John was pointing to.

They ask John about who he is— but John exposes their real need, and points them to the only one who can address their true need, not just what they thought they needed. The Baptist quotes Isaiah 40:3 when he says I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord. Straightening the way is a metaphor for the moral problem that had to be address. The “way” of their lives was crooked and dirty. When a great dignitary comes to town, local city officials work to clean the place up so they won't be embarrassed when, perhaps the president comes to town. Sweep the sidewalks, get all the trash off the streets. The Baptist is telling us that the King is coming, and he is worthy of having the place cleaned up. Filthy streets are an offense. So filthy lives are an offense to King Jesus. There is a moral standard necessary for an audience with the King. Things must be cleaned up. To put that in common biblical terms, the filthiness of sin, which separates us from our King, must be cleansed. As John is preparing them for this by baptizing in the wilderness calling them to repentance from sin.

Both Elijah and John focused on repentance — turning from sin and self-orientation to godly living and a God-oriented life. But that brings up a gospel dilemma, doesn't it? We can't clean ourselves up. John is setting the expectation and calling people to turn from what produces spiritual death and what produces separation from God. But like the Old Testament law, it can only expose sin; it can't cleanse it. There is one coming that is greater than John, and he has already on the scene, though you do not know him. v 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! The Messiah and all of his fullness was not fractured, like the religious leaders imagined. He is the word the king who is worthy of a consecrated life and humble service. But he is also at the same time, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world as our great high priest. He is the incarnate word of God who not only gives us. God's word but is the word of God, revealing God to us. This is who John is pointing to.

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Let's wrap up this week learning some negative lessons from the religious leaders that will encourage us toward Christ. They were seeking a Messiah who would make their lives more pleasant, more free to live as they chose. They were looking for someone to improve their political situation. They completely misunderstood who God is and what he is doing as sovereign King overall. Imagine if Jesus's first coming was delayed until today, and we were asking John questions to evaluate whether or not this was a Messiah we wanted.

I'm not really sure who I am. Will God help me find myself?

I'm looking for the god who will affirm and approve of the way I want to live. If I'm going to have a god, that's what will need to happen.

Is this the god who will fix my country's government so that it does things the way I think they should be done?

Is this the god who will affirm my sovereignty and my authority over my life and anything else I want?

Will this god supply all my needs as I determine them according to his riches in glory?

Like the questions from the Pharisees, these questions reveal that we don't understand our true problem or our true need. I don't need to find myself, but lose myself to gain Christ. I don't need a political fix, I need a Savior. My greatest problem is sin that brings death, and my greatest need is the Lamb of God who takes away sin.

Here the questions I should ask:

Are you the God who is able to take away my sins?

Can you conquer the corruption in me and overcome my dishonor and death through your cleansing blood eternal life?

God, are you able to satisfy the deep thirst and hunger in my soul?

Jesus, the Lamb of God, calls you to turn from yourself and your ways, which are deeply rooted in death and rebellion, and follow him to the cross, through the grave and into eternal life in the kingdom of God. And this is the God you need. This is the Lamb you must have, else you will bear the penalty of your sins yourself. Run to Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of everyone who comes to him.

PRAY