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Gospel of John / John 1:19–34

Introduction

Recap of Session 4

Last week we started at Exodus 33. Moses asked to see God's glory, and God told him no one can see His face and live. Then John wrote, "We have seen His glory." The Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us. The God nobody could see has been seen, and the one and only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known.

Tucked into the middle of that passage, at verse 15, was a man crying out. John the Baptist said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me." We noticed that we already had two witnesses on the stand: the writer at verse 14 and the Baptist at verse 15. Tonight the Baptist steps out of the prologue and into the story. And the first thing that happens to him is that a delegation shows up with a question.

Historical and Literary Context

From poem to courtroom

The prologue reads like a hymn. Eighteen verses of eternity, light, and glory. Then verse 19 changes the sound completely. "And this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, 'Who are you?'" We have gone from poetry to an interrogation.

That fits how this book was built. In Session 1 we read 20:30-31 as a courtroom, with signs offered as evidence and the reader asked for a verdict. In Session 3 we saw that witness was a legal category in Israel. Deuteronomy 19:15 says a matter has to be established by two or three witnesses. Now a witness takes the stand, and the first thing anyone asks him is his name.

There is also a gap to notice. You know who Jesus is, because John told you in verses 1 to 18. The people in this story do not know. Every question in this passage comes from someone who is missing what you already have.

Who is asking

Verse 19 says "the Jews of Jerusalem" sent them. This is the first time that phrase appears in the Gospel, so it is the first place to use what we set up in Session 1. John uses the term in more than one way. Here it does not mean the Jewish people in general. It means the Jerusalem authorities, the leadership in the capital. Those are the people who sent priests and Levites, the temple's staff, and verse 24 adds the Pharisees.

There is an irony here. John the Baptist was born into a priestly family. His father Zechariah was a priest ([Luke 1:5](#)). Now priests are being sent out to the wilderness to question a priest's son.

Was their question fair? Yes. Moses had given Israel a test for anyone claiming to speak for God ([Deuteronomy 18:20-22](#)), and crowds were pouring out to the Jordan. Somebody in Jerusalem had to find out what was going on. This is an investigation, not yet an attack. It helps to start there, because the tone of the questioning will change as the Gospel goes on.

A Jewish historian named Josephus also wrote about John and the crowds he drew. That confirms this man was real and that people took him seriously.

Three figures Israel was waiting for

Their questions make sense once you know who Israel was expecting. There were three figures. First, the Christ, the anointed King from David's line. Second, Elijah, whom Malachi said would come before the day of the LORD ([Malachi 4:5](#)). Third, the Prophet, the one Moses said God would raise up like him ([Deuteronomy 18:15](#)). John gets asked about all three, in that order. We will take them one at a time in the first unit.

Where and when

Verse 28 says all this happened at Bethany beyond the Jordan. That is on the east side of the river, out in the wilderness. It is not the Bethany near Jerusalem where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. We meet that Bethany in chapter 11.

Then John starts counting days. Verse 29 says "the next day." So does verse 35, and so does verse 43. Chapter 2 opens with "on the third day." John is keeping a calendar, and it runs

straight into the wedding at Cana. He wants us to feel how fast this moves at the start of Jesus' public ministry.

So the scene is set: a delegation from Jerusalem, a man in the wilderness, and one question asked three different ways. John keeps answering it by saying what he is not.

1: The Voice (John 1:19-28)

John 1:19–28 BSB

¹⁹ And this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"

²⁰ He did not refuse to confess, but openly declared, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ "Then who are you?" they inquired. "Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet: "I am a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "

²⁴ Then the Pharisees who had been sent

²⁵ asked him, "Why then do you baptize, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ "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 straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ All this happened at Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Three questions, three denials (vv. 19-21)

The delegation asks one question: "Who are you?" Look at how John answers. Verse 20 says he "did not refuse to confess, but openly declared." That is a heavy way to introduce an answer, and the answer is a negative. "I am not the Christ."

Luke tells us why that mattered. The crowds were wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Christ ([Luke 3:15](#)). He had the crowds and the following. He had a message that stirred people up. The easiest promotion in Israel was sitting right in front of him, and the first thing he does is shut the door on it.

Then they ask if he is Elijah. He says, "I am not." This is where some of you may already be frowning, because Jesus says the opposite. In [Matthew 11:14](#), Jesus says of John, "if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." So did John get it wrong?

We went through this when we taught [Mark 9](#), and it is worth walking through again. Start with what Malachi promised. God said He would send "Elijah the prophet" before the Day of the LORD ([Malachi 4:5](#)). Elijah never died. He was taken up in a whirlwind ([2 Kings 2:11](#)). So a lot of people expected the man himself to walk back onto the scene.

That is the question the delegation asked. "Are you Elijah?" meant "Are you the man who was taken up?" John's honest answer was no.

Now look at what the angel told Zechariah about his son. He would go before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah" ([Luke 1:17](#)). That is a description of a role. John would do what Elijah did: call a rebellious people back to God and get them ready.

When the disciples came down from the mountain in [Matthew 17](#), they asked why the scribes said Elijah must come first. Jesus said, "Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him." Then Matthew adds that the disciples understood He was speaking about John the Baptist ([Matthew 17:12-13](#)).

So there are two questions here. Is John the man Elijah? No. Does John fill the role Malachi promised? Yes. John answered the question he was asked, truthfully.

I would also notice the wording in [Matthew 11:14](#): "if you are willing to accept it." The identification was not forced on anyone. You had to be willing to see it. That is the same pattern we saw in the prologue, where some received Him and some did not. It starts with John.

One more thing to notice. I think John gave the short answer because the long answer would have turned into a conversation about John. That part is my reading, not something the text says.

The third question is about "the Prophet." Moses told Israel that God would raise up a prophet like him ([Deuteronomy 18:15](#)). Some in Israel treated this as a separate figure from the Christ, which is why it is a separate question. John answers with one word: "No."

I want you to notice the pattern. "I am not the Christ." "I am not." "No." The answers get shorter and shorter. John is stripping himself down. We will leave the Prophet question open for now. Philip raises it in verse 45, and the crowds raise it in chapters 6 and 7. John's Gospel does answer it, just not tonight.

One more observation. John says "I am not" three times here. Later Jesus will say "I am" in ways John never would...

A voice (vv. 22-23)

John 1:22-23 BSB

²² So they said to him, "Who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet: "I am a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' "

The delegation is under pressure. "We need an answer for those who sent us." They have to file a report, and they want a category to put him in. John refuses all of theirs and gives them a verse.

"I am a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" That comes from [Isaiah 40:3](#). Look at where it sits in Isaiah. The chapter opens with "Comfort, comfort My people" and a promise that Jerusalem's iniquity has been pardoned ([Isaiah 40:1-2](#)). This is a word to exiles, and the road in verse 3 is being built for the LORD Himself to come to them. In Isaiah, that name is printed in capital letters. It is the personal name of God. By verse 9, the herald is shouting, "Here is your God!"

So John says he is the voice announcing a road for the LORD. And then, in verses 26 and 27, he points at a man. John does not stop to do the math for you. He doesn't need to. The writer already did it in verses 1 to 18.

There is a second picture here, and it ties back to the prologue. Jesus is the Word. John is the voice. What is a voice for? A voice exists to carry a word, and then it is gone. That is exactly where [Isaiah 40](#) goes next. The people are like grass that withers, "but the word of our God

stands forever" ([Isaiah 40:6-8](#)). The voice fades and the Word remains. John is content with that.

One small detail is easy to miss. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the writer quotes [Isaiah 40:3](#) about John. Here John says it about himself ([Matthew 3:3](#), [Mark 1:3](#), [Luke 3:4](#)). In this Gospel, John defines himself with one verse, and the verse is about someone else.

Why do you baptize? (vv. 24-28)

John 1:24-28 BSB

²⁴ Then the Pharisees who had been sent

²⁵ asked him, "Why then do you baptize, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

²⁶ "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 straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸ All this happened at Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Now the Pharisees take over. Their question is really about authority. If you are not the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?

It was a fair question. The prophets had spoken of God cleansing His people with water at the end of the age ([Ezekiel 36:25](#)). A man baptizing in the wilderness was making a claim, and I suspect that is why they pressed.

John answers by shrinking his own work. "I baptize with water." That is all. Then he turns them toward someone else: "among you stands One you do not know."

Hear the present tense. Not "will come" but "stands." He is already here. This is the same truth from verse 10: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him." The delegation from Jerusalem is within a few yards of the One the whole Old Testament was pointing toward, and they don't know it.

Then John describes Him. "He is the One who comes after me." That echoes what he cried out in verse 15, and you will hear it again in verse 30. Then he adds, "the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." Untying sandals was the work of a servant, the lowest job in a household. The man the crowds were calling a prophet says he is not fit to do that for Jesus.

Verse 28 gives us the place: Bethany beyond the Jordan. John names it because he is giving testimony. A witness tells you where it happened.

John's Gospel doesn't tell us what the delegation did with the answer. No reply is recorded. It simply moves to the next morning, and the man who spent a whole day saying who he isn't is about to say who Jesus is.

2: The Lamb (John 1:29-34)

John 1:29-34 BSB

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

³⁰ This is He of whom I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.'

³¹ I myself did not know Him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that He might be revealed to Israel."

³² Then John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and resting on Him.

³³ I myself did not know Him, but the One who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

³⁴ I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Look (v. 29)

Remember where John got his job. He quoted Isaiah 40:3, and the herald in that same chapter has one assignment. "Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" (Isaiah 40:9). The next verse says, "Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might." And the verse after that says, "He tends His flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in His arms" (Isaiah 40:10-11).

Now watch John. He does not use Isaiah's words. He points at a man walking toward him and says, "Look, the Lamb of God." But the job is the same. Announce that He has arrived, and aim every eye at Him. Last week we saw that the God nobody could see has been seen. Here is the herald's moment. He points, and it is Jesus.

"The next day." Yesterday John spent his time saying who he was not. Today he sees Jesus coming toward him, and he says the sentence his whole ministry was aimed at. "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Notice who is silent. Jesus does not say a word in this entire passage. Everyone talks about Him. His first words in this Gospel come in verse 38, and we will get there next week.

Which lamb did John mean? He doesn't say. He says "the Lamb of God" and lets the Old Testament crowd in behind him. I'll give you four:

First, Genesis 22. Isaac asks his father, "where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answers, "God Himself will provide the lamb" (Genesis 22:7-8). A ram turned up in the thicket (Genesis 22:13). The lamb God promised was still ahead. Now a man in the wilderness points at someone walking toward him and says, "Look." John never cites this story, so I call it an echo. But it is a strong one. "The Lamb of God" is the lamb God provides.

Second, the Passover lamb in Exodus 12. Its blood on the doorposts meant judgment passed over the house. I'm holding this one for Session 45. John ties Jesus' death to Passover in ways no other Gospel does, and we will give it room then.

Third, the daily lambs at the temple, offered every morning and evening (Exodus 29:38-42).

Fourth, Isaiah 53. "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). "The LORD has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). "He bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12). Of the four, this is the one I would lean on hardest. It is the only one that pictures a lamb carrying sin. And John himself quotes Isaiah 53:1 later in this Gospel (John 12:38).

Here is the honest part. The Passover lamb was about rescue from judgment. It was not a sin offering in the strict sense. The words "takes away sin" come most naturally from Isaiah 53 and the sacrifices. I think John is gathering these pictures into one title, not picking a favorite.

Now look at the last phrase. "The sin of the world." It says "sin," not "sins." He is talking about the whole problem. And it says "of the world." That is the same world from verse 10 that was made through Him and did not recognize Him. The Lamb's reach is as wide as the world's need. But receiving is still the door (John 1:12).

Many of you spent a long time in Revelation with me, where Lamb is one of the main names for Jesus. This is where the title first appears in Scripture's story of Him, spoken by a man in the wilderness pointing at someone who is walking toward him.

A man who was before me (vv. 30-31)

John 1:30–31 BSB

³⁰ This is He of whom I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.'

³¹ I myself did not know Him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that He might be revealed to Israel."

Verse 30 is the saying from verse 15, almost word for word. Last week it was a cry in the middle of the prologue. Now it has a face to go with it.

Look at the wording in this Bible. "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me." Both are in one sentence. "A man." And "He was before me." That is the hinge of the prologue again, the eternal One in flesh.

John was born first. Luke tells us Elizabeth was in her sixth month when Mary conceived (Luke 1:36). By birth, John is older. By being, Jesus is older.

Then John says something that sounds odd: "I myself did not know Him." He says it twice, in verses 31 and 33. But they were relatives (Luke 1:36). And in Matthew 3:14, John objects when Jesus comes to be baptized: "I need to be baptized by you."

So what did John not know? The text does not tell us how well the two men knew each other. My reading is this. John knew Him as a person, maybe as a righteous man. What he did not know was who He was, the Coming One. Verse 33 tells us why he knows now. God told him. "The One who sent me to baptize with water told me." John did not work it out. It was revealed.

Put verse 26 next to verse 31. In verse 26 John says, "among you stands One you do not know." In verse 31 he says, "I myself did not know Him." Same words. John once stood exactly where the delegation stands. He knew the Scriptures. He built his whole ministry on Isaiah 40. And he did not know.

What separates John from the priests and Pharisees is not intelligence or training. It is that God told him. "The One who sent me to baptize with water told me."

That should humble anyone who studies the Bible closely, and that includes this room. We can learn every title in this chapter, the Word, the Light, the Lamb, the Son of God, and still stand in the wilderness not knowing the One who stands among us. Knowing about Him and knowing Him are not the same thing. That is the warning the church at Ephesus got in Revelation, a church that had every answer right and had left its first love (Revelation 2:4).

John did not figure Jesus out. He was shown. And that is why the instruction in verse 29 is so simple. Look.

And verse 31 tells us what all that baptizing in the wilderness was for. "That He might be revealed to Israel." The crowds, the river, the whole movement, all of it was a stage for revealing one man.

Notice the words that keep coming. "Look" in verse 29. "I saw" in verse 32. "I have seen" in verse 34. John is a man who sees first and then speaks.

The Spirit rests on Him (vv. 32-33)

John 1:32-33 BSB

³² Then John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and resting on Him.

³³ I myself did not know Him, but the One who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

John never describes the baptism itself. He tells us what he saw. The Spirit came down "like a dove" and was "resting on Him."

We looked at why Jesus was baptized when we taught Mark. Matthew records that Jesus said it was "to fulfill all righteousness" ([Matthew 3:15](#)). It was not repentance, because He had nothing to repent of. He stepped into the picture of His own death and rising. [John 1](#) does not go there. It goes to the Spirit.

That word "resting" matters. In Isaiah's promise of the coming King, he says, "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him" ([Isaiah 11:2](#)). In another passage the LORD says of His Servant, "I will put My Spirit on Him" ([Isaiah 42:1](#)). Two promises, and John watches them land.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit came on people for a task, and He could leave. Saul is the sad example ([1 Samuel 16:14](#)). Here John is told what to look for, a Spirit who descends and rests. That is the mark of the One.

Now an objection that has been around for a very long time. Did Jesus become the Son of God at His baptism? The early church had a name for that idea, adoptionism. Some read Mark's account that way. Here is the answer from this chapter.

Verse 1 says the Word was with God and was God. Verse 30 says "He was before me." And verse 34 says "this is the Son of God." It says "is." It does not say "became." Look at verse 33

too. The sign was given to John, so that John would know. The Spirit's coming marked Jesus out for John, and it set Him apart for the work ahead. It did not make Him who He was.

Then John gives Jesus a second title in the same breath. "He who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." Look at who does the pouring. In the Old Testament, God promises to pour out His Spirit ([Joel 2:28](#)). Now John says a man will do it. Jesus Himself said it again before He left: "John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" ([Acts 1:5](#)). That began at Pentecost.

So how does this fit with the way we teach the Spirit at Hope City? When someone puts faith in Christ, the Spirit comes to live in that person, right then. Paul says anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him ([Romans 8:9](#)). He says we were sealed with the Spirit when we believed ([Ephesians 1:13-14](#)). He says we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body ([1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). So no believer is missing the Spirit.

Scripture also shows people being filled with the Spirit again and again. Peter was filled at Pentecost, again before the council, and again with the whole group ([Acts 2:4](#), [Acts 4:8](#), [Acts 4:31](#)). And Paul commands believers to be filled ([Ephesians 5:18](#)). Having the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are two things.

The New Testament uses "baptism with the Spirit" in more than one way, and I'm not going to settle every question tonight. What this verse settles is who gives Him. Jesus is the Giver. Whatever the Spirit does in your life, He is there because Jesus sent Him. We will hear much more about Him in chapters 7, 14, and 20.

The Son of God (v. 34)

John 1:34 BSB

³⁴ I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

"I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Look at the order. John saw, then he testified. And notice where we are. Verse 19 opened with "John's testimony," and verse 34 ends with "I have seen and testified." The whole passage is wrapped in that one word.

The question that opened this scene was "Who are you?" John answered by turning it around, three times and then once more. Now we have the answer to the question that matters. This is the Son of God.

Hold that next to the last verse of the book. John wrote the Gospel so that you would believe "that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" ([John 20:31](#)). Those are the two titles. John the Baptist denied the first one for himself in verse 20. He gives the second one to Jesus in verse 34.

One quick note for anyone with a different Bible. If yours says "God's Chosen One" or "the Chosen One of God" in this verse, that is not a mistake. Last week at verse 18, I told you some differences between Bibles come from translation and some come from the copies themselves. This one is in the copies. Most Greek copies read "Son of God." A few early copies and early translations read "Chosen One," and scholars still argue about which came first.

Two things to know. First, "Chosen One" echoes [Isaiah 42:1](#), "My Chosen One," the very verse where God says, "I will put My Spirit on Him." That fits what John just described. Second, nothing we believe depends on this verse. Nathanael calls Jesus the Son of God before the chapter is over ([John 1:49](#)), and the title runs all the way to 20:31.

John has said it. The next day he says it again, and two of his own disciples are standing close enough to hear.

Core Truths

- The first question the story asks is "Who are you?", and every answer from John ends up pointing at Jesus.
- The man John points at is the Word from verse 1. He comes after John in time and stands before John in being.
- The road John prepared was for the LORD Himself to walk, and Jesus walked it.
- The Lamb is God's own provision for the sin of the world, and the door to it is still receiving Him.
- The Spirit rests on Jesus without leaving, and Jesus is the One who gives the Spirit to others.

Closing

John answered three questions with "I am not." I want you to hear how restful that is.

Think about what he had. A crowd. A movement. A delegation from Jerusalem asking whether he was the Christ. The easiest thing in the world would have been to let them think so. He said no, and then he said it again, and the answers got shorter.

I think some of you are carrying a role that belongs to Someone else. You are the fixer in your family. You are the one everybody calls. You hold the church together, or the marriage, or the money. You are the one who is supposed to make a certain person turn around. You carry real responsibility, and I'm not telling you to drop it. But John knew his size. He was a voice, and a voice that carries a Word is plenty. He did not need a bigger title to know he mattered, because he knew who sent him. "There came a man who was sent from God" ([John 1:6](#)). He said the same thing about his baptizing: "the One who sent me" ([John 1:33](#)).

Here is the other half. The sin of the world is not yours to take away. There is a Lamb for that. You can say what you are and what you are not. I am not the Savior of my family. I am not the Savior of this church. I am not even the savior of myself. That is a relief.

So put down what is His and then do what John did. Look away from yourself and point at the One...