

The Signpost to the Saviour

¹⁹ Now 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 Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said: "I am *'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD,"*' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴ Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. ²⁵ And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. ²⁷ It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." ²⁸ These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹ The next day John 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 is preferred before me, for He was before me.' ³¹ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water." ³² And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. ³³ I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God." ³⁵ (John 1:19–34)

You know that when there is a big event coming up, those organising make sure there is plenty of announcements, plenty of promotions before the event happens. When Hollywood is about to release a blockbuster movie, they make sure that months before, there are trailers, and interviews, and merchandise galore. Before a speaker gives a speech or a presentation, there is usually a host or someone who introduces the speaker, gives his achievements, his expertise, announces the books he has written and the degrees he has, before he comes up to speak.

All of these show us the importance of preparing people before the big event. There is something about the human heart that needs preparation, introduction, readiness before the main event. It's as if we don't really appreciate the event unless there is a build up, a lot of pointing, and intro music. If that's true for sports events and concerts and speeches and movies, how much more important was it for the entrance of the Messiah into the world. Though he entered the world unusually (a virgin birth), and though it was announced unusually (angels to shepherds), it was in many ways quite quiet. When the time came for the ministry of Messiah to begin, it needed a big, public, and clear introduction and preview. That introduction and preview was the man John the Baptist.

John the apostle has completed his grand prologue and now begins his account of the life and work of Jesus Christ. And John begins his account of the ministry of Jesus where the other three evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, begin theirs: with John the Baptist. Matthew and Luke included accounts of the birth of Christ, the apostle John went further back into the pre-existence of Christ, but now they all begin the adult ministry of Jesus with John the Baptist.

We have already met him twice in the prologue, in verses 6 to 8, and verse 15, but now we have an extended account of an incident in John the Baptist's life.

And in this incident, we will see two ways that John testified of Jesus. And these two ways remain the same two ways that someone testified to us of Jesus. They remain the same two ways we will testify to others of Jesus. So learning this historical account of John not only teaches us the grand history of our Messiah, it gives us insight into how people come to Messiah.

I. The Preparatory Work of John

Let's remind ourselves of some details of who this John the Baptist is. John was born into a priestly

family. His father, Zacharias was a Levite, and an Aaronite, so he was allowed to be a priest. His mother Elizabeth, was also of a priestly family. Luke's Gospel tells us they were already advancing in years and had not conceived, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias and told him that they would have a son and he would have a special assignment. He would live a consecrated life, and turn Israelites back to the Lord and prepare for the arrival of the Messiah.

We remember that Zacharias was struck dumb because of his unbelief, but it was reversed when on the day of his son's naming ceremony eight days after birth, he signalled that the child was to be named John, and not Zacharias. John took the Nazarite vow to not have any strong drink, and he lived a solitary life in the deserts, living a subsistence life.

Somewhere around 28 or 29 A.D, about a year or a year and half before Jesus began His ministry, John began preaching. He preached a very strong message of personal repentance. He called on Israelites to not depend on their ethnic heritage, but on a personal response to God.

He did something quite outrageous. He began baptising people, immersing them in the Jordan. Now immersing yourself was not unusual. Judaism had plenty of ritual baths at all sort of places where you immersed yourself to be ritually clean. And if you were a Gentile, you had to do that alongside circumcision and a sacrifice. By immersing other people, John was first saying that he had the authority to do this. Not self-immersion, but immersion by someone else. Second, if this was for Jews, then it meant they too needed salvation as much as the Gentiles.

This caused quite a stir, but in that next year, John became hugely popular and well known.

⁵ Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him ⁶ and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matthew 3:5–6)

At least the entire south part of the country knew about John, were baptised by Him, and followed him in some way. Because he had such a message of judgement, and a powerful message of repentance and reform, people began to speculate.

¹⁵ Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, (Luke 3:15)

The first century was rife with Messianic hope and expectation. There had already been some false messiahs. Roman oppression was stoking the fire. People remembered Daniel's prophecies. We see people like Simeon expecting to see Messiah in their lifetime. So people wondered if John wasn't the Messiah after all.

And as you can imagine, the religious authorities of Israel became rather unnerved about this man in the desert, wearing camelskin, eating locusts, and telling everyone to repent – including them! Jews in high places of authority were very wary of any religious movement that might create disorder and lead to trouble with the Romans.

So, at the height of this speculation, a kind of delegation of religious leaders is organised to go and interview John. According to verse 19, some of them were priests and Levites. John the Baptist was himself from that lineage, so they would have been especially interested in what Zacharias's son was up to. But there was some speculation about a priestly messiah as well.

According to verse 24, some of those in this delegation were Pharisees.

Israel in the time of Jesus was mainly split into three religious groups. The one were the Sadducees. Not all Sadducees were priests or Levites, and not all priests and Levites were Sadducees, but many were. Many Sadducees were wealthy and politically connected, and most lived in Judea and near Jerusalem. Doctrinally they differed from the Pharisees because they did not believe in the

resurrection of the body, the afterlife, or the existence of angels and demons. They typically only accepted the five books of Moses. They rejected any concept of predestination and heavily emphasised free will.

The Pharisees were spread all over the country, and mostly controlled the synagogue. They were a small group, only about 4000 in the first century. They were known for being extremely zealous for keeping the Law, and for building fence after fence around each law, coming up with extra rules and commandments to protect the original biblical commandments. Their beliefs were the opposite of the Sadducees: they believed in the resurrection of the body, they believed in angels and demons, they believed in the inspiration of not only the books of Moses, but also that of the prophets, and they believed in predestination and foreordination, while also holding to responsibility and human freedom.

Now it is this group that John the apostle is usually referring to in his Gospel when you read the words “the Jews”. Sometimes he means it neutrally – the Jewish people, as when Jesus says in chapter 2 that salvation is of the Jews. But more often he uses it to refer to specific Jews within the Jewish nation, usually the Jews of Judea who were Pharisees or Sadducees. This delegation may or may not have been official, but it probably had representatives of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

So this delegation comes from Jerusalem, with a basic demand: identify yourself. Who are you? Now they knew his name was John, and that he was the son of Zacharias, but what they are really asking is – what is your role? Your title? Your rank? Your mission?

Now think of just how tempting this situation is to a normal man. The whole nation is coming out to you. You know that the speculation is there that you are the long awaited Messiah. Even if you know you are not, you could at least keep them guessing with some cryptic and ambiguous answers. Don't say yes, but don't say no, keep the rumour-mill going, keep the speculation rife, keep the spotlight on yourself.

But the text tells is in very emphatic terms: He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.

John did not merely deny that He was Christ – the Greek term for the Messiah – but he made it part of his confession. John's own testimony, witness, confession of who he was emphatically said, I am not Messiah.

Well, they said, in that case, who are you? Are you Elijah come again, as Malachi predicted? John says, I am not. Now, if you've read in the other Gospels you know that Jesus Himself said that John was Elijah who came. So is this a contradiction? No. The best understanding is that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, and those who could receive it, as Jesus said, received him as such. But from John's own point of view, he saw himself as a simple servant.

They also asked if John was the Prophet. This is a reference to the prophecy in Deuteronomy that God would raise up a prophet like Moses. When we read that text, we see it fulfilled in Messiah, but for some reason they separated the prophet from Messiah. But John says, I am not Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet.

Well, now the delegation is frustrated. They need to give an answer to those that sent them. John clearly has some kind of prophetic, even end-time kind of ministry. He preaches with power. People are coming to him. What role is he playing? They have a set number of cards in their deck, and they need to write his name on one of them.

John's reply shows they had missed something in Scripture. He said: “I am *‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD,”*’ as the prophet Isaiah said.

John takes them to Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40 was originally written for Israel that would return from exile

through the Persian ruler Cyrus, and so God called for the road from the east back to Jerusalem to be made straight and cleared for His people. But that foreshadowed a greater fulfilment, when the Lord Himself would be coming to Israel, and needed a forerunner to prepare the way. *“In ancient times, a travelling King would often have a messenger sent ahead of him, who would do two things. He would repair the roads that the king would be travelling on, so that the king's arrival would not be a bumpy, uncomfortable one. Second, he would announce to the people of that place that the king was coming.”*

In other words, the messianic expectation in the air is correct. He is coming, he is close at hand, but I am not he. In fact, John uses an emphatic pronoun: It is not I who am the Christ.

But they are still confused. If John isn't one of the important end-time characters, not Messiah, not Elijah, not the Prophet, why is he then baptising? That suggests authority, it suggests the start of a movement, or some kind of group or organisation. John's answer is in verse 26:

²⁶ John answered them, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. ²⁷ It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”

Yes, I am baptising, using water, but there is someone who is already here that you haven't recognised. He comes after me in time, but He is before Me in rank, and He is so far above me, that I am not worthy to unloose His sandal strap. By the way, there was a saying by the rabbis that a disciple should do everything his master told him, but he was not required to loose his sandal strap. That was the task of a slave. John says, I am not even at that rank compared to Him. In other words, Yes, I'm baptising, but not because I have some kind of status or power. I'm not starting a movement in my own name. I am just preparing the way for the One coming.

In the other Gospels, John is recorded as having said, I baptise you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire, meaning He will bring both salvation to those who believe, and judgement to those who reject. John's baptism was not Christian baptism. It was not the Great Commission baptism of disciples in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, where Israel prepared their hearts to receive the Messiah.

That makes us think about the whole matter of heart preparation. Why couldn't Jesus just arrive? Why couldn't He just start preaching and doing miracles? Surely they would have been just as impressive had John not preached?

It shows that the message of the gospel often needs preparation. Yes, it is true that the decisive thing is the inworking of the Holy Spirit to open blind eyes and break stony hearts. But we must never think that the Spirit does His work without using a lot of ordinary means, a lot of everyday ways to prepare people to believe. Even a strongly Reformed writer like J. Gresham Machen, an early 20th century Presbyterian who would have believed strongly that God is the sovereign, miraculous worker in salvation, he once wrote “...[I]t would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power of God. That can overcome all lack of preparation, and the absence of that makes even the best preparation useless. But as a matter of fact God usually exerts that power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel.”

These may involve God showing people the wonders of creation. It may involve him showing them the ugliness of evil, of other people's sin, of their own sin. It may involve showing the person with

goodness and kindness, so that gratitude wells up and they must ask who they should thank. You can prepare an unbeliever's heart for the gospel by pushing them to consider the absurdity of their own worldview, the hollowness of what they are living for, the emptiness of life without God, the guilt and regrettable nature of sin.

I wrote a whole book about preparing your children for the gospel because I believe in this principle so strongly, that the heart is like a garden, and it is our job to remove as many weeds, thorns, thistles, and stones of unbelief, objections, difficulties and rejection as possible. We can prepare our children for the gospel by showing them the beauty of authority, and the danger of disobedience, the glory of Christian art and music, and the tackiness of the world, the centrality of God by how central God is in our routines and habits and traditions.

That was John's ministry, and in many ways, it is ours. Ours is not to do the converting. Ours is not to do the miracle of making new hearts. Our is to continually straighten a person's path back to God in Christ, flatten the objections, repair the potholes, and show them the way back.

II. The Pointing Work of John

It is one day later. All this is happening in Bethabara, which is difficult to pinpoint. Some translations have it as Bethany. It was obviously by the Jordan river, and likely in the south, closer to Jericho and Jerusalem.

Piecing together the timeline, it seems that John had baptised Jesus here several weeks before this day. You recall that after His baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to fast, and to be tempted by Satan. Now Jesus has successfully passed that temptation, and He returns to where John is baptising. It is just one day after the delegation from Jerusalem came out, and now Jesus arrives.

John sees Him, and says to anyone listening, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

It is hard for us to get back into the minds and ears of those who first heard this. We take a Christian understanding of Lamb of God, and read it back into this passage. But remember, for the Jews that heard this, a lamb was not usually one of the sacrifices. Even the Passover Lamb was never explicitly said to atone for sin; its blood caused God's judgement to pass over the households. There were lambs sacrificed in the morning and evening, but they weren't said to be for sin. So John is likely staying in Isaiah where it prophesies of Messiah: "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

So John is really taking some Old Testament ideas and combining them: the Passover lamb that causes God's judgement to pass over you, the substitute ram for Isaac that Abraham offered in place, the lamb that was the peace offering of Leviticus 3, the lamb that was the sin offering of Leviticus 4, the lamb that was used to redeem the firstborn. All these get combined in Jesus. Jesus is the substitute, the Passover, the sin offering, trespass offering, peace offering, and the redeemer. And we know John means all this because he said this Lamb "takes away the sin of the world".

The Messiah comes and He will provide atonement for the whole world. That doesn't mean everyone is saved, but it means the worth of His sacrifice, the value of His sacrifice will be sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world.

Now since Jesus is obviously standing among the crowd, and seems quite average, John has to explain. How can it be this unrecognised man standing in the crowd, how can He be the Messiah?

³⁰ This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.' ³¹ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water." ³² And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. ³³ I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

John says, this is the one whose ministry begins after mine, but who is before me both in time and in rank. I did not recognise that He was the Messiah, but God used my baptising to reveal Him to me. God told me, one of the men you will baptise will have a sign. When you baptise Him, you will see the Holy Spirit descend upon Him and remain on Him. He is the Spirit-anointed Messiah! He will be the One who baptises not with water but the Holy Spirit."

John points to Jesus and says, "That man – that man standing right there, when I baptised Him, I saw the Spirit descending like a dove on Him and remaining on Him."

Now when John says, "I didn't know Him", he probably does not mean, I didn't know Jesus at all. After all, Jesus' mother Mary and John's mother Elizabeth were said to be relatives. We are not sure how close, but Jesus and John may have been cousins a few times removed. But they lived in different parts of the country, so it is likely that John may not have actually met until Jesus' baptism. But even if they had, until John saw this special sign, he did not know for sure that Jesus is the Messiah. But once He did, he could say verse 34 emphatically: '³⁴ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.'" John has been preaching about the need for repentance, about the coming of Messiah, but here He is, standing right there. He does not only have to preach; he can point to Him.

Again, there is something of an analogy for us. However God prepared the soil of your heart, however he did some kind of John the Baptist ministry in your life, if you are a Christian then there came a day or a moment when the Spirit of God moved upon your understanding, moved upon your heart and pointed to Jesus Christ, and said, "This is He! This is the One! He is the Answer, the Life, The Way, the Truth! He is the Solution to the riddle, the End of the Journey, the Secret of the Story. He is the Rescuer, and the Judge in One. He is the Substitute, and the Conqueror." Those might not have been the words, but the Holy Spirit is the one who moves upon your heart, and draws you to the Saviour. Scripture calls it the sanctification of the Spirit. Jesus said "¹³ However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth;" (John 16:13)

It is the Spirit of God who takes the Word of God, and shows people that Jesus is the Son of God. All the arguments in the world will not bring faith. All the answered objections, all the historical and scientific and archaeological evidence, all the philosophical conundrums solved will not bring you to faith. They are merely God preparing the way of the Lord in your heart.

In the end, the testimony that converts a soul is the Spirit of God persuading a heart internally: showing that human mind: this is Christ! Don't reject Him! Receive Him! Accept Him! Believe Him! Trust in Him! Submit to Him! He is the One you need!

So consider now two applications, one for your own heart, and one for others. In your own heart, where are you? Has God been preparing the way for Christ to come and own your heart? Has He been removing your objections, stripping away your safety nets, laying siege to your own self-sufficiency, removing those things you relied on, showing you the hollowness of your idols? Don't

turn back, like some did at the preaching of John. You can see where the signpost is pointing, so go forward to Christ. Or perhaps God has brought you to that moment when the Spirit has shown you unmistakably: Jesus is Christ! He is the one! He has brought you all the way, but there I still one thing you can do wrong: you can roll off the stretcher that brought you to the healer. You can jump out the ambulance that is bringing you to the hospital. You can resist when you should receive.

But now for other hearts. You who are a disciple of Christ, it is now your charge to bear witness of Jesus. You are to both prepare the way, and then point. Work on hearts, remove the stones and the obstacles and the objections. But then at some point, you need to not just do that, but get specific. You need to point to Jesus Christ and boldly say: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the Chosen One. He is the Son of God. The Spirit of God opened my eyes, and he will open yours too.