

Reflections on John 1:19-34

by Will Groben

Day 1 / Memorize: This week, work on memorizing John 1.29.

Learn: Prayerfully read John 1.19-34. Some translations have “the Jews” in v.19, which refers to Jewish religious leaders [consistent with other translations]. These religious leaders probably were members of the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling council of the Jews. In v.24, they are identified as Pharisees, who were teachers in the synagogues [churches]. The priests had functions in the temple, while the non-priestly Levites at this time were responsible for the music at temple ceremonies and acting as temple guards. As John the Baptist was the son of a priest, a provocative non-conformist with regard to standard religious practices, and operating in an area close to the enclave of the Essenes [a religious isolationist group], it is not surprising to find he attracted the attention of the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

Reflect: Notice that the apostle John, as he wrote this book, mentioned almost nothing of John the Baptist’s activities other than his pointing to Jesus as the Christ [Messiah]. The language John the Baptist used in his denials is emphatic: “I am not the Christ!” The framing by the author also adds emphasis: “And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed” [NASB]. Even when forced to talk about himself, John the Baptist disciplined himself to point toward Jesus and minimize himself. As you do good things – helping people, serving in the church, and such – do you consciously choose to direct all attention and praise to Jesus or do you seek attention and praise for yourself? Which do you think is right? Pray about this and confess any efforts to seek approval or praise for yourself instead of Jesus.

Want more? The officials asked John the Baptist if he was Elijah. Elijah was a prophet more than 800 years before John or Jesus were born, but who ascended to Heaven instead of dying [2 Kings 2.11]; there was a prophecy about his return to call the nation back to the covenant with God: read Malachi 4.5-6. John, keeping the focus on Jesus, offered the literal truth that he was not the actual person Elijah. However, Jesus said something interesting about this. Read Matthew 11.14; 17.10-13. Though John the Baptist was not literally Elijah, he apparently did fulfill the role prophesied in Malachi. Both Elijah and John the Baptist called the nation to repent of their failure to honor the covenant with God, so they would avoid judgment and instead be blessed with a new covenant that the Messiah would bring.

Day 2 / Memorize: Continue to work on memorizing John 1.29.

Learn: Prayerfully read John 1.19-23. When the officials asked John the Baptist if he was “the Prophet,” they were referring to Deuteronomy 18.15 [which you should take a moment to read now]. Moses prophesied that God would send a prophet-leader like himself, a person whom the people referred to as “the Prophet” or “the Greater Moses.” Now read what Peter said about this in Acts 3.17-26. Do you see who this “Greater Moses” or “Greater Prophet” really was?

In v.23, John the Baptist identified himself by quoting Isaiah 40.3. As often in Old Testament prophecy, this passage of Isaiah contains a mixture of prophecy about contemporary events and prophecy about future events. Isaiah was concerned with the redemption and deliverance of Israel from Babylon, but this verse is also part of a longer passage culminating in Isaiah 52.13-53:12 which is clearly about the redemption and deliverance brought by the Messiah [Christ]. John the Baptist called for repentance by the people of Israel – for them to return to the ways of the Lord – so that they could be adequate to receive the Messiah.

Reflect: If you are a believer, a true Christian, then you have already repented of your previous lack of faith. But have you repented [committed to change] about your other sins, the ways in which your heart has been hardened and your mind has strayed from the paths of God and the teachings of Jesus? John the Baptist’s message is for us also: to clear the way for you to experience Jesus fully in your life, you must submit to him in repentance. Pray for clarity about any sin issues in your life, and then confess and repent [commit to change]. For repeating sin issues, find an accountability partner or seek counsel from a small group leader or elder.

Want more? What John the Baptist was doing [v.25-26] probably was shocking to the Jews. They believed in a water baptism for Gentiles coming into the Jewish faith, to cleanse them of defilement. John the Baptist’s application of baptism for *them* would have a horrifying implication: that *they* were defiled too! Of course, that is exactly what he was saying: that they needed to repent and be cleansed of the defilement of their sinful hearts. Unlike those who believed they had an adequate relationship with God because of their descent from Abraham, John the Baptist called for personal repentance and faith similar to Old Testament prophets. Consider what Jesus said in Matthew 8.10-12. Can anyone rely on his/her heritage [“born into a Christian family” or “raised in the church”] to get into Heaven?

Day 3 / Memorize: Continue to work on memorizing John 1.29.

Learn: Prayerfully read John 1.24-28. Those in the official delegation from the Pharisees were not satisfied with John the Baptist's answers about his own identity. Most priests and Levites were Sadducees who controlled the Temple; they were more political, so they might have been content to ensure John was not making claims that would lead to civil disorder or political trouble. But the Pharisees [teachers in the synagogues] were concerned about the religious aspect: they asked him, if you are not the Christ, the Prophet, or Elijah, then by what authority do you do this baptism? In the customs for Gentile converts and of the Essenes [an isolationist sect], people baptized themselves, but John the Baptist was baptizing others, suggesting he believed he held some kind of authority. Notice how John the Baptist's answer in vv.26-27 points to Jesus again, not himself! In v.27, he says he is not worthy to do for Jesus even the most menial task for a slave [there was a saying that a disciple would do anything for his master except untie his sandals!]. He also told these religious officials they did not know the one person they should know!

Reflect: What is your view of your own importance? Though he had authority from God to do his ministry, John the Baptist did not think himself worthy to be a slave of Jesus. That not only points out the relative value and authority of Jesus, but also the correct view of ourselves in God's economy. Do you act like an important person whom others should serve or as a humble servant of others? Pray about your self-image. It is not biblical to consider yourself worthless, for we all have value because God made us and chose to give us grace; but find your value in Christ, not with pride in yourself.

Want more? Listen to the thought-provoking and witty thirty-minute sermon by Dallas Theological Seminary Professor Oscar Lopez [delivered on 03.30.07] at <http://www.dts.edu/media/play/consider-yourself-a-servant-of-christ-oscar-m-lópez/> [or go to www.dts.edu, find "chapels" and search for Lopez].

Day 4 / Memorize: Continue to work on memorizing John 1.29.

Learn: Prayerfully read John 1.29-34. In v.29, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming to him. This is after the baptism event depicted in the other Gospel accounts. His statement about Jesus is extraordinary: that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Some think "Lamb of God" ties back to Genesis 22.8, while others think of the Exodus 12 account of the Passover or some other symbolism. Most interesting is the play on words in that the term "Lamb of God" in Aramaic [the language John the Baptist would have been using] can also mean "Servant of God." Read Isaiah 53 and see the amazing prophecy that calls the Messiah "God's servant," "like a lamb," and the bearer of iniquities and sins!

Reflect: As you consider these three ways of referring to Jesus, what is your impression? What does this mean to you? If Christ was willing to be God the Father's servant even to the extent of dying on the cross to bear the sin of the world, what should be the attitude of followers of Christ [like you] about serving and suffering for the cause of Christ?

Want more? Our English translations depict John the Baptist as saying, "I am the voice of one shouting in the wilderness" In Hebrew, Isaiah said, "A voice cries out, 'In the wilderness...'" The Greek of the New Testament could be translated just like the Hebrew is; it is unclear why traditionally it has been translated the way it has. Just a curiosity!

Day 5 / Memorize: Continue to work on memorizing John 1.29.

Learn: Prayerfully read John 1.19-34. In v.30, John the Baptist attests to Jesus' humanity and his eternality [and thus divinity]. In v.31, he emphasizes that his purpose is to help people receive Jesus. In vv.32-33, he explains from whom he gets his authority to baptize and testifies to his source of knowing about Jesus as the Christ: God sent him and God told him how to identify the Christ. John the Baptist saw these actual events [see the description in one of the other Gospels too], they were not a vision of some kind, but real events. Note, he does not say the Holy Spirit descended as a dove, but like a dove; the Holy Spirit is not a bird! John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove would from high in the sky, and he testified that the Holy Spirit remained upon Jesus and that Jesus baptizes in the Holy Spirit.

Reflect: When we become believers, Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, offering new life and a quality of life otherwise unknown. Have you thought about this amazing gift of the Holy Spirit? Is it making a difference in your life? Do you know the blessings associated with this gift? If any of your answers are negative, what should you do about it?

Want more? In v.34, some early Greek manuscripts [and thus English translations] read "God's chosen one" instead of "Son of God." That's ok. Look at Isaiah 42.1, a prophecy about the coming Messiah. What do you think of that?