

John 1:19–51 (ESV)

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 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.”

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.³⁸ Jesus

turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"³⁹ He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.

⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ).⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these."⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a big deal in the first century. Jesus calls him the greatest of all those born of a woman, the greatest of the Old Covenant prophets. Many times in the New Testament, you get hints as to John's popularity and renown. Maybe not quite a 1st-century equivalent of Billy Graham, but perhaps more like a John Piper. He was a preacher of righteousness who commanded a loyal following, and said much to irk many in the religious establishment. So loyal a following, in fact, that long after John had died and even after the gospel of Christ had gone out into much of the world, there were still many who maintained their identity as disciples of John. We get a glimpse of this in Ephesians 19 when Paul arrived in Ephesus and had some disciples of John who had not yet received the Holy Spirit. In fact, long after Christianity had been established, history records different groups identifying themselves as disciples of John the Baptist. Even today, a small gnostic sect known as the Mandaeans consider John one of their chief prophets.

Given that background, it's entirely plausible that John's treatment of the Baptist as a witness to Christ in this chapter, and the book's progression from John being front and center to him gradually fading out of the picture, function in an apologetic way to argue for the supremacy of Christ over John and to clarify and correct misinterpretations of John's role in God's redemptive plan. The fact that John is likely writing from Ephesus, where we know existed at least some disciples of the Baptist makes this even more plausible.

Whether or not that's the case, the function of this chapter is clear - to put forward witnesses regarding who Jesus is and to demonstrate to us what it looks like to be a disciple and a witness.

Who Are You?

Representatives of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem ask about 3 different identities and John denies all of them:

- The Christ - He makes it clear straight away that he is not the Messiah.
- Elijah - **Why would they ask if he was Elijah?** Based on Malachi 4:5, the expectation was that Elijah would come preceding the coming of the Messiah. Some speculated that since Elijah was taken up in a chariot that he remained alive and hidden until it was time for

him to appear. John denies this as well. **How does this square with the other gospels where Jesus and others declare that John is Elijah who is to come?** Some possibilities:

- John is not Elijah returned to earth, but has come in the “power and spirit of Elijah” as Luke says. That is, he fulfills the role of Elijah.
- Or, maybe John did not know that he was Elijah.
- The Prophet - **What do they mean when they say the Prophet?** This is likely a reference to Deuteronomy 18 and Moses’ prophecy that there will arise a prophet like him. Some viewed this as the same person as the Messiah, others viewed them as two separate people. John denies this as well.

So who is he? He is the voice sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He was not the light, but he came to bear witness about the light. Why is he baptizing? Baptism was generally reserved for new converts to Judaism. What new order was he introducing by this baptism? **It is here that he testifies that the one coming is so far greater than him that he’s not worthy to do the work of a slave, to even untie his sandal strap. John came baptizing to signify the coming new Exodus to reveal the one who was to come. What does John’s responses to the Pharisees tell us about his own character and what example does he set for us?**

John’s approach here should be a reminder to all of us, especially those that preach the word - we do not proclaim ourselves but Jesus, and ourselves as slaves for Jesus’ sake.

The Lamb of God

When Jesus arrives on the scene, John knows exactly who he is because God has revealed it to him. This is in contrast to the Jews who don’t even know who John is or what he is doing. John recognizes Jesus and calls him the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

What does he mean by this? The imagery is clear - a gift of God, provided as a sacrifice to remove the sin which separates God from this sinful world. The sacrifice of the lamb signifies redemption and forgiveness. One writer explains it like this¹:

“By the end of the story, John (the gospel-writer, not the Baptist) has made the meaning clear. The death of Jesus takes place, in this gospel, on the afternoon when the Passover lambs were being killed in the Temple. Jesus is the true

Passover lamb. John, like many New Testament writers but in his own particular way, wants us to understand the events concerning Jesus as a new, and better, Exodus story. Just as God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, so God was now bringing a new people out of an even older and darker slavery. But who is this new people? In the original Exodus story, Israel is rescued from the dark powers of the world, which in that case meant the Egyptians under Pharaoh. But now, according to John, God's lamb is going to take away the sin of the world itself. This can only mean that God's rescue operation is moving out, wider than just Israel, to embrace the whole of creation."

The Spirit's descent

John witnesses the Spirit's descending on Jesus and, more importantly, remaining on him. Unlike others in the Old Testament, on whom the Spirit would fall and enable for a task, the Spirit remains on Jesus, just as the prophets declared would happen when the Messiah arrived. Not only did it remain on him, but he would baptize others with the Spirit, which is a sign of the dawning of the Messianic age - once the temple of the human heart is purified by the blood of the Lamb, God's Spirit takes up residence there.

John witnesses this and identifies him as the Son of God, or perhaps, the chosen of God - which would be an allusion to Isaiah 42:1, "my Servant, whom I have chosen." The phrase Son of God to John the Baptist and others in those early days would have primarily carried the connotation of King of Israel, a synonym for the Messiah who would rescue them from pagan domination. By the time John writes his gospel, we understand the phrase in its fuller sense to mean that and so much more, as we saw in Chapter 1.

Disciples

The first two disciples of Jesus in John's gospel are former disciples of John who have now moved on to follow Christ. Interestingly, Andrew is named but not the other. **Who might the other disciple be?** In the other gospels, we see that John, son of Zebedee, (presumably the author of this book) was also one of the first disciples and likely the unnamed one here. John describes their discipleship this way:

- They followed him
- They came and saw
- They remained with him

Andrew goes to get his brother Simon Peter, whom Jesus names “the Rock.” **What is ironic about Jesus’ calling Peter a ‘rock’?**

Now Jesus calls on Philip to follow him, and Philip goes and gets Nathaniel and tells him that he has found the Messiah. Nathaniel, who is from a nearby town of Nazareth expresses doubt (not unlikely that he is a bit cynical about would-be Messiahs coming from Galilee as there had already been a few). His comment about Nazareth is interesting, considering it’s a stone’s throw from his own hometown of Cana (c.f. John 21:2). There is a little bit of inter-village rivalry here, almost as if Nathaniel was from Columbus and Jesus was from Ann Arbor - he nearly passed on becoming a disciple of the Son of God because of a silly prejudice. **Does this happen today? Or perhaps, have we passed on introducing people to Jesus because of such a prejudice?**

Philip repeats Jesus’ earlier call to “come and see.” Jesus calls Nathaniel a Israelite in whom there is no deceit - in contrast with Jacob, who was known for his guile. Jesus speaks of a time when he saw Nathaniel and apparently shouldn’t have been able to, demonstrating that he is more than a mere man. That’s enough to persuade Nathaniel.

Jesus then tells the whole group (and us), you will see greater things than these - *“And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* (John 1:51, ESV)

What’s the significance of Jesus’ statement in v. 51? This is a reference to Jacob’s experience at Bethel in Genesis 28. Let’s consider 2 aspects of these texts:

- **Compare the statements** - If you compare John 1:51 and Genesis 28:12, the Son of Man takes the place of the ladder in Jacob’s dream. Jesus positions himself as the place where heaven and earth meet, as the way which we gain access to the Father. Jacob names the place where he had the vision of the ladder "Bethel" which means, House of God. That is who Jesus is - the real and true Bethel.
- **Compare the situation** - Jesus is speaking to Nathaniel, whom he calls a Israelite, in whom there is no deceit - prompting a comparison with Jacob, or Israel, in whom was much deceit. Jesus claims Nathaniel will see something similar to what Jacob saw. Nathaniel is astonished and changes his mind at the revelation of Jesus, just as Jacob was at Bethel in Genesis 28:16-17. John has narrated a

parallel situation with the Nathaniel and the other disciples in the place of Jacob, and Jesus in the place of YHWH himself.

The Essential Elements of Being a Disciple:

Disciples must know who Jesus is. Look at all of the titles of Jesus in this brief segment -

- Messiah,
- the Prophet,
- Jesus,
- Lamb of God,
- one who baptizes with the Spirit,
- chosen [Son] of God,
- rabbi/ teacher,
- Christ/ anointed one,
- son of Joseph, Nazarene.

They did not just blindly follow a person named Jesus, but had true knowledge of him (whether or not they understood the full significance of the titles used).

They must experience Jesus in a way that reorients who they are. The examples of the disciples in this story are helpful:

- John the Baptist's knowledge of Jesus leads to self-denial and a positive witness for Christ.
- Both Andrew and Philip have an encounter with Jesus and then go and tell others, insisting that they must "come and see" and experience him for themselves.
- Jesus' seeing Nathaniel under the fig tree is a reminder of who is seeking who in conversion - it is God who makes the first move, and he knows us and seeks us out before we know to look for him.

We are to love God with our hearts and our minds.

This chapter is a reminder that true discipleship requires not merely a heartfelt piety and love for Jesus, but also true knowledge of who he is and what he is doing. Likewise, true discipleship is not just true knowledge but includes an experience of the living God and a heartfelt love for Christ.

How do we see this dichotomy at play in the Church today?

Do you feel confident to be able to accurately give an answer to someone when they ask, who is Jesus?

1. Why would Pharisees ask if John the Baptist was Elijah? What do they mean when they ask if he is "the Prophet?"

2.. What do John's responses to the Pharisees tell us about his own character and what example does he set for us?

3. What does it mean to call Jesus the "Lamb of God...?"

4. What is ironic about Jesus' calling Peter a 'rock'?

5. Nathaniel nearly passed on becoming a disciple of the Son of God because of a silly prejudice. Does this happen today? Or, have we passed on introducing people to Jesus because of such a prejudice?

6. What's the significance of Jesus' statement in v. 51?

7. What are the essential elements of being a disciple of Jesus in this chapter?

8. Do you feel confident to be able to accurately give an answer to someone when they ask, who is Jesus?

¹ Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1, 11)