Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The First Testimony Concerning Jesus, Part 1
Scripture: John 1:19-37
Code: 43-5

As we come to the nineteenth verse of the gospel of John, the nineteenth verse of the gospel John--that's chapter 1, verse 19--we come to the historical section of the book. Verses 1 to 18 is theological, presents the nature of Christ predominantly as God with God, that is to say, He is God and yet He is distinct from God the Father--He is the Creator; He is the Word, that is He is the expression of God; He is the Life; He is the source of all that lives; He is the Light, He is the shining of the nature of God into the darkness of this world. All of that has been laid out. Verse 14, the Word, the eternal Son of God became flesh, dwelt among us. So John has introduced us to the nature of Christ in theological terms, and that is an unparalled portion of Holy Scripture. So if you missed any of those messages, you do well to listen to them and find good source material on the opening 18 verses, because the reading of that would be of great benefit and blessing to you.

But John has a sole and singular purpose in His gospel and it's crystal clear. I would say it's clearer than, let's say, the purpose of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We know that they're presenting Christ. But John is not just presenting Christ; his theme and his purpose he articulates in chapter 20, verse 31 at the end when he says, "These have been written"...these words contained in this gospel..."so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah, the Anointed One], the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." So his purpose is polemical, giving you evidence so that you might believe, and it is evangelistic so that believing you might be saved and receive eternal life.

So everything John says is geared at believing Jesus is the promised Christ, the Anointed One, the promised King, the Son of God. His deity and His humanity and His being the Lord and Savior are John's focus. So John doesn't spend a lot of time on historical background. He is not so much about the narrative as is Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are called the Synoptic Gospels because they together tell the same story. And why three? Because, if for no other reason, Deuteronomy says that the truth must be confirmed in the mouth of two or three witnesses, and so we have these three inspired witnesses to tell us the full story of our Lord Jesus. And there's much theology in it, of course, in the Synoptics; but John here tells us only what is germane to his proof that Jesus is the Christ and that believing in His name is the only way to eternal life.

John's first line of testimony is from another John, John the Baptist. And that's why verse 19 begins, "This is the testimony of John." And that refers to John the Baptist, not John the apostle, who is the writer. So here you have the beginning of his polemical, historical record concerning Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God. So that you might believe that, he amasses evidence that is incontrovertible--

“and that believing you may have eternal life in His name.”

The first testimony to Jesus, we might call this section, the first testimony to Jesus. Let me read you this record that comes from John the apostle about John the Baptist: “This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ And he confessed and didn’t deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ They asked him, ‘What then? Are you, Elijah?’ And He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?’ And he said, ‘I am a voice, a voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as Isaiah the prophet said.’”

“Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’ John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’ These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.”

“The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He on behalf of whom I said, “After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.’ John testified, saying, ‘I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, “He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”’” And that testimony is the point of the whole book.

“Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.”

Now we’re going to cover that section from verse 19 to 37 today and next Sunday. This is the first testimony that John the apostle records concerning the deity of Jesus Christ, and it is from John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet and the first New Testament preacher. Now remember, Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest man who ever lived up until his time (Matthew 11:11). The greatest man who ever lived up until his time. That is an amazing statement. When you think about all of the great people that lived, going all the way back to the patriarchal period, all the way back to Abraham, all the way back to Moses, all the way back to David and everybody else, that’s quite an amazing statement. It is amazing because John the Baptist was not a great leader. John the Baptist did not live in the halls of influence. John the Baptist did not have a social presence. John the Baptist didn’t fight any battles. He didn’t establish any institutions. As far as we know, he had no formal

education. He left nothing, speaking of institutions or movements. He lived completely detached from society. He had no wealth. He lived like a poor rural person who was a nomad. And he lived the first thirty years of his life in the obscurity of the Judean desert.

His story, the history of it, is told in Luke 1. And you can read Luke 1; it virtually takes up the entire chapter all the way to verse 80. You can read that story, and it's important to know that story, to know that his parents were barren, could never have children. He is a miracle child promised by God through an angel that came to his father and all the story of that, and how it was declared to his father that he would come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and he would turn the hearts of the people toward God and prepare them for the Messiah. The history is very important and very rich.

But it doesn't interest John because John's interest is not history. John's interest is evidence. John's interest is testimony. John's interest is witness to the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. So to John it doesn't matter where he lived; it doesn't matter what he wore; it doesn't matter that he had a camel's hair coat; it doesn't matter that he ate locusts and wild honey. It really doesn't matter the history of this man as remarkable and wonderful as it was. What matters is what he said. Now for thirty years of his life he didn't say anything.

Now remember, John the Baptist was probably a cousin to Jesus since the mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were related. And John the Baptist was born about six months before Jesus. And so in the same thirty years that John was waiting to begin his ministry, Jesus was waiting to begin His. Jesus waited in Nazareth, in the home of Joseph and Mary. Joseph probably died somewhere in that period of time; so He among the rest of the brothers and sisters took care of His mother, working in the carpenter shop. Thirty years of total obscurity with only one glimpse at the age of twelve. But during the same thirty years, John the Baptist is in the desert. After you close the chapter of Luke 1, about the Benedictus of Zacharias when he pronounces blessing and salvation on generations to come because of the ministry of his son introducing the coming Messiah, John completely disappears. You might say he disappeared after his circumcision, never to be seen for thirty years. He was a desert nomad.

However, after those years had passed, Luke chapter 3 gives us a point in time, "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar," that puts it around 26 or 27 A.D. Pontius Pilate is now governor. Herod is tetrarch. His brother Philip is a tetrarch. Herod's in Galilee. Philip's in Ituraea and Trachonitus. Lysanias is tetrarch of another area called Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas are the two high priests and they were related, as you know, by marriage. And they were the architects of the execution of Jesus eventually. So that's just some historical notation.

So we're all the way down deep into the life of John at 30 years and Jesus at 30 years, and we read this, "The word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; as it is

written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every ravine will be filled. Every mountain, hill will be brought low; every crooked place becomes straight, the rough roads smooth; and all flesh will see the salvation of God.’”

John was launched into ministry by a word from God. Listen, John knew his history. He knew of the angelic visit to his father, although his father, you remember, couldn’t say anything because he was so doubtful. The Lord shut his mouth until John was finally born and then went through the normal purification. He couldn’t say anything up until that point, but after that, believe me, he spent his whole life telling the story about his son. And he must have spent his whole life waiting for God to say something to his son whom he knew was wandering out there in the “kitty litter” east of Jerusalem.

And finally it came and the word of the Lord came to him, God Himself spoke to him. God commissioned him. God called him. Mark 1:4 says of John he suddenly appeared in the district preaching. He just came out of nowhere, which is to say that he hadn’t been preaching prior to that.

In Matthew chapter 3, verse 5, Jerusalem and Judea and everywhere else came to hear John. He was so remarkable, so powerful, so unique, so effective as a preacher. And if you study the Synoptic Gospels accounts of John, you do find those things about him--courageous, bold, powerful, confrontive. He says to the leaders of Israel when they show up, “You snakes, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Just a very bold man in the sort of the line of all the great prophets of the past.

The people had a lot of interest in John because of the greatness of his preaching. But he had something else in his favor and that was the fact that he was from a priestly family and priests were respected. They would be the most respected people in the culture. There were tens of thousands of priests all over Israel living in all areas who a couple of times a year would go to Jerusalem and do priestly function in the temple. But for the most of the year they would be in their communities, and they were respected as those who represented God and taught Scripture and were seen as pious.

So, in John 5:35 we read that of the people it was said, “You were willing for a time, for a while, to rejoice in His light.” He was popular. He was a popular preacher. Not only because of the power of his preaching, but because he was saying the Messiah’s coming, the Messiah’s coming, the Messiah’s coming--and that’s the message that people had wanted to hear. They were weary of the centuries that had gone by, full of reminiscences about biblical prophecies about Messiah that never came to pass. They were weary of the occupying forces that had come into their land and desecrated it because they were Gentiles. They were certainly weary of the presence of the Romans. And so John was very popular because the people wanted this message that he was giving about the coming of Messiah. And that’s what took the edge off his message of repentance, because the repentance was connected to the coming of Messiah. And so he was preaching repentance, and people were coming

and saying, “Okay, we repent.” And he would say to them, “If you truly want to repent and be cleansed by God on the inside, then demonstrate that by a public act of baptism,” which was an external symbol of that desire for an internal cleansing. And John had an amazing impact.

So he is the first and he is a very formidable testifier to the deity of Christ. He is absolutely unique. You understand there hasn’t been a prophet in Israel for 400 years. They haven’t heard from God in 400 years. This is a prophet. This is a real, true prophet. And he’s saying what we’ve all wanted to hear, “Messiah is coming.” And he’s telling us to repent and get our lives ready for the arrival. And so they were rejoicing for a while in his life. Remember John 5:35 says, “He was a shining light, a burning lamp.”

Now as we look at this passage, it gives us the testimony of John. And I just want to...there’s going to be a lot of threes that we’ll be working with, just the way it’s laid out. But I want to give you kind of an overview. There are three things that you’re going to see here in this passage, just from the bird’s eye view, getting above it and looking over it. The first thing you see: the character of a faithful preacher; you see the character of a faithful preacher. Yes, John is that shining lamp; yes, he is that voice crying in the wilderness. That’s...that’s his function. But what about his character? Well, his character is revealed here, I think, in a very clear way. If you go back to verse 15 you have reference back in verses 6, 7, and 8 to John the Baptist, and you have a reference to John the Baptist in verse 15. So let’s go back to the one in verse 15, even before his testimony starts in verse 19.

“John testified about Him and John cried out, saying,” and this is John the Baptist testifying to Christ, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’” This is a very important statement. “He existed before me though He was born six months after me.” That’s an affirmation of the eternality of the Son of God. “He is born after me but He existed before me.” But more importantly, looking at his character, “He has a higher rank than I.” You know, in a sense, that’s hard to grasp because there was no preacher in 400 years, and even the final prophets in the Old Testament 400 years ago, weren’t this popular. I mean, there could be a case made that John had been elevated to a position above everybody. Certainly, from a popular standpoint, he had been elevated above the high priest, the father of the high priest, the former high priest, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the leaders of the Pharisees, the chief priests, the scribes, and all the rest of the elite who ran the false, apostate, legalistic system of Judaism.

But John doesn’t see it that way. Even though he is *the* man, he is *the* popular preacher, he is *the* elevated preacher, he says, “The one who is coming after me has a higher rank than I.” And then in verse 27, he says this, “It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I’m not worthy to untie.” That was the job for the lowest slave. Take the master’s sandals off, wash his feet. John says, “I’m so low, I’m lower than the lowest slave, I’m not even up as high as a foot washing slave--that’s how low I am.”

And in verse 30 he says the same thing he said in verse 15, “After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.” So what is the character of this faithful preacher? Humility; in a word, humility. He sought no honors. He sought no money, no pay, no accolades, no titles; he has no title, no flattering words. He didn’t seek disciples because in verse 35 it says, “He was standing with two of his disciples,” two of his learners, two of his students; and he looked at Jesus as he walked and he said, “Behold the Lamb of God!’” And what he was saying to them was, “Why are you standing here with me? Follow Him.” “The two disciples heard Him speak, and they followed Jesus.” He didn’t want anything--he didn’t want followers; he didn’t want disciples; he didn’t want honors; he didn’t want titles. Verse 23 says, “I’m a voice”...“I’m a voice”...that’s all I am is a voice...“crying in the wilderness”...“crying in the wilderness,” and it was the wilderness. It was the desert. But it was not only a physical, geographical wilderness, it was a spiritual wilderness, of barren hearts. I’m just a voice.

Therein...therein lies the proper view of the preacher. A faithful preacher is marked by humility, seeks no honors, no money, no disciples, no titles, no flattery--he’s a voice. And he directs everything to One greater than himself, everything.

The second thing you see here is not only the character of a faithful preacher, but you see the character of a faithless people. You’re going to meet in this opening section the people who rejected the Lord, the people who were disinterested in Christ. They’re a delegation that you first meet in verse 19, it says, “The Jews sent to Him priests and Levites from Jerusalem.” So Jerusalem is a sort of a religion central. The Sanhedrin runs the religious system. The Sanhedrin is the Jewish council of seventy elders plus the high priests, and they call the shots religiously in that apostate religion. The term “the Jews,” that is a term you will see seventy times in the gospel of John. It is never used ethnically. It is never used racially. It is always used in one sense: it is used to identify the enemies of Jesus. It’s John’s choice term. You don’t find it in the other gospels. You find it here in the gospel of John. It is the term that John uses for the religious establishment, the religious elite from the high priest all the way down to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, priests--everybody else who were the duly constituted leaders of apostate Judaism who resented, hated Christ and ultimately were responsible for handing Him over to the Romans to be executed. So you meet in this passage right away, right at the beginning in the first verse of the historical account of the gospel of John, the faithless people. And you’re going to see them all the way through. You’re going to see these people...I said...seventy times this term is used, and it always refers to the enemies of Jesus.

But there’s a third group that you’re going to see and that’s the faithful people, the faithful people. And you get a glimpse of them in verse 37 when those two disciples heard what John said about the Lamb of God and they followed Jesus. That’s how this gospel breaks down. All the way through this gospel you’re going to see the faithless people associated with the leaders of Israel, and the few faithful who followed Christ. That’s going to be the story.

So we see at least in a broad sense as we look at this passage, the character of a faithful preacher. He may be a bright and shining lamp, but he sees himself as nothing but a voice, disdaining all flattery, all followers, and calling everyone to follow One who is far greater than himself. We see the character of faithless people, who no matter what the signs are, no matter what the testimony is, John the Baptist gave testimony. You know John the Baptist told people after he had baptized Christ that Christ was the Messiah, because the Father had said, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”--the same Father who had commissioned Him to ministry. The Spirit had come down like a dove; Jesus had just come from triumphant temptation over Satan. John was giving all this testimony. No matter what John said, the Jews did not believe it. And when Jesus came and began to give testimony, they didn’t believe Him. When He did miracles, they didn’t believe them. When His words were the words of God, they didn’t believe them. And that’s the faithless people that track all the way through and scream for His blood at the end and are destroyed in the destruction of Jerusalem. Sprinkled into the story as well are going to be those who put their trust in Christ.

Now just...I know I’m giving you a lot of detail, but I want you to get this picture here because it’s so really important for you. This section from 19 to 37 unfolds on three days. And that’s very rare, by the way, in the New Testament, to find something that’s so clearly identified in a period of sequential days. The only thing you have close to this would be the Passion Week where you can sort of put the things together that happened on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. It’s particularly the cross on Friday, the resurrection on Sunday, and you can kind of piece it together with the chronologies that are given. But here is the only place really in the four gospels you have specifically one day, two days, third day. And it’s a three-day look at the apex of the testimony of John the Baptist. Now he’s been...he’s been preaching. We don’t know for how long. He will go on preaching; we’re not sure exactly how long. But here we’re going to catch him at the high point because on day two Jesus walks up and he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That’s day two. We’re going to join him on day one and we’re going to be there on day three because John has given us this record--three specific days giving us the sequential testimony of John the Baptist toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let me back off a little bit and tell you how the scene works out. This would be the last of the year 26 A.D., or maybe the beginning of 27 when all this starts to happen. John takes off. He receives a word from the Lord out in the wilderness to begin to preach, as I read you in Matthew 3. And he launches his ministry in the wilderness. About the same time, generally speaking, the Lord Jesus leaves Nazareth. Been there 30 years, working in the carpenter shop, taking care of His family in the death...in the event of the death of His father. He hasn’t done any ministry at all, except whatever personal ministry He did, which would have been amazing, of course. But He now goes down the Jordan Valley, and He has to go all the way down to where John is because He’s going to be baptized by John, because that’s part of Him fulfilling all righteousness. In other words, doing everything that God required of everyone.

So He heads down the Jordan Valley. He is going to a place that's identified for us in verse 28. "These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing." Now just a couple of comments about that.

We don't know exactly where that is. We know where Bethany by Jerusalem is; it's still there. Two miles east of Jerusalem down the Mount of Olives, a little town called Bethany. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived there and Jesus stayed there. But as in many countries, there were towns and villages that had the same names. So this is not that one. This is not Bethany by Jerusalem. This is Bethany beyond Jordan. You've got to go all the way down the back of the Mount of Olives, all the way down to Jericho, all the way across the Jordan River, and somewhere out in the wilderness beyond that there's another Bethany. And that's where John is. It needed to have one thing for sure, water. Because John was not a Presbyterian, John put them down, held them down, and brought them up.

So Jesus leaves, goes about thirteen miles south of the Sea of Galilee, about twenty-six miles south and east from Nazareth, and He comes down to where John is baptizing. This is before this account, because in this account John is remembering the baptism. He remembers the baptism, verses 32 and 33, so it's already happened. And this is where Jesus is launched into His ministry.

Now John's preaching repentance. Get ready for Messiah. Jesus comes. John doesn't really know who He is. Verse 31, "I didn't recognize Him," he says. "I didn't recognize Him." Again in verse 33, "I didn't recognize Him." That tells you he didn't have a halo; file that. And there were thousands of people coming, all Jerusalem, Judea is coming, and here comes just another Jewish man dressed like everybody else, walking twenty-six miles from His home, or about that. And He shows up and introduces Himself, and John doesn't want to baptize Him. He says, "You need to baptize me." And He says, "No, you have to baptize Me so that all righteousness can be fulfilled." Everything that God requires of His people, I'm going to do to show them the path of obedience. So John baptizes Him, and you know the story. The Spirit comes down like a dove, and it doesn't mean that the Spirit came down as a dove--get over that, would you please? The Spirit is not a dove, never was a dove, so if you've got doves everywhere, that is not the point. He came down the way doves come down and land. I mean, He could have been a canary for that matter. He could have been a pigeon--anything that comes down and lands. The Holy Spirit came down and rested on Him, the way a dove comes down and rested on Him. For all we know He might have been manifest in light, or He might have been manifest in fire.

And then the Father speaks out of heaven, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," and John baptizes Him. Now we don't know how many people heard that, knew what was going on; and now remember, there's thousands of people, and he's just dunking them all as they come. And then Jesus disappeared. He left.

Where did He go? He was led by the Holy Spirit, according to Luke 4...Matthew 4...into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And this is where He is going to demonstrate and prove His triumph over Satan. For forty days He's tempted in the wilderness. In the meanwhile, forty days John keeps doing what he's doing, preaching; people coming, going through this what is really a proselyte baptism. The Jews baptized Gentiles when they wanted to come into the Judaistic religion as a symbol of their desire to be cleansed on the inside. They went through this washing, which meant that the Jews who were doing it were saying, "I'm no better than a Gentile." That's quite a confession of sin for a very self-righteous and spiritually proud people.

But anyway, Jesus is gone now and He's being tempted and John keeps ministering. The forty days are up; the angels come and minister to Jesus. He eats. He gets some strength. He's up in the devastation to the west, up in the rugged, amazingly rugged, terrifyingly rugged, mountains above the city of Jericho or in that area somewhere, and He starts down, and He comes all the way down back to John. And on day two He arrives. The ministry of John the Baptist has been going on but this is going to be the apex. So that's the scene. Got it? Okay. We're going to go to 19.

"This is the testimony of John" that occurred during that three-day period. Day one, day one; and then day two; and then day three. All right, let's look at day one. "This is the testimony of John when the Jews sent to Him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him"...and so forth and so on. Day two comes in verse 29 because verse 29 begins, "The next day." Day three begins in verse 35 because verse 35 begins, "The next day."

Now let me tell you how John's testimony went. Day one, John said, "He's here; He's here." Day two he said, "Behold Him." Day three he said, "Follow Him." Three days, three sequential messages to three different groups. Day one, he's talking to a delegation from the Sanhedrin. Day two, he's talking to the people in general. Day three, he's talking to his own disciples. This is just a wonderful glimpse of the very most important three days in the ministry of the greatest man who had ever lived up until his time--the last Old Testament prophet, the first New Testament preacher.

This is the testimony of John. Day one, "The Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem." The Jews, that is the hostile religious establishment or the enemies of the truth, they're the enemies of righteousness. They are the enemies of godliness. They are the enemies of John. They are the enemies of repentance. Then they will be the enemies of Jesus. So they get a coalition, a delegation, if you will, of priests and Levites. These are common people. The priests were common people. There were, as I said, tens of thousands of them and they were religious but they were common. They're not the elite. They're not the scribes, you know, the religious theologians, the elevated theologians; not the Sadducees, the people with all the money and the power. And then the Levites came with them. What were the Levites? They did menial work to support the priests. I guess one way to say it would be the priests...the priests were the questioners. They were the religious

delegation where the Levites were the protectors. One of the things the Levites did was work in the temple, and they worked under the temple captain and under the lieutenants of the temple captain in crowd control. The Levites worked to keep the peace; they were kind of a riot squad. They were officials.

And so, here come priests. And, you know, they sent priests and that was good because they knew John came from a priestly line. That must have been known because anybody in the priestly world would have known that. Zacharias, you remember, had actually been offering a sacrifice in the temple during the course of his work when the angel came to him to tell him that John would be born. So he got a little mileage out of being in the priestly line. That respect may have been why--one of the reasons why--they could rejoice for a little while in his light.

So here comes the representatives of the Jews who are the enemies of the truth and righteousness and John and repentance and Jesus, and they send this delegation of kind of the normal course of priests who wouldn't know the Scripture and be the religious sort of neighborhood leaders and their attendance who could do some crowd control if necessary. But they are a delegation; verse 24, notice that, had come "from the Pharisees."

Now the Pharisees gets us closer to the problem here because we don't have illustrations of Pharisees being converted (one at the end). They were the avowed enemies of Jesus who drove this thing in the direction of animosity and hatred toward Him. The Sanhedrin is behind it. They are the ruling council of seventy elders plus the high priest. They send this delegation. The Pharisees are the...they are the gate keepers of Jewish apostate religion, and they send these common priests and Levites and they're going to ask some questions of John. This is a...this is a mission from the Sanhedrin.

So they say in verse 19, "Who are you?" "Who are you?" The implication is, "Are you the Messiah?" Why do you say that? Because the answer indicates that that was the point of the question. "Who are you?" It's thoughtful. It's a respectful way to ask the question. I wouldn't equivocate on that. They want to know if this man is the Messiah or thinks He's the Messiah. According to Luke 3:15, "While the people were in a state of expectation..." Why were they in a state of expectation? Because John was saying the Messiah's here and they were all wondering in their hearts about John as to whether he was the Messiah. So that's naturally on everybody's mind: "Are you the man? I know you keep talking about somebody else of higher rank who was born after you but existed before you, but are you the man?" They had to find out because the masses of humanity were pouring out of the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area to go hear John. He was having far more religious clout than anybody else.

In verse 20 "he confessed and didn't deny," but confessed. And by the way, that's an English way of trying to translate the Greek, which is very, very strong. He was outraged. He was livid at that

question. “He confessed and didn’t deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah. I am not the Christ.’”

Now, by the way, they weren’t looking for a Savior, you have to understand that. They weren’t looking for a lamb; they weren’t looking for a sacrifice; they weren’t looking for someone to take the wrath of God. They were looking for a King because they thought they were okay. That was a modest commitment to repentance for the sake of John and for the sake of being ready for the Messiah. But there was no sense in which they were looking for a Savior.

If you go to John 3:25, there was a discussion on the part of John’s disciples with a Jew about purification. So they came to John, John the Baptist, and said to him, “Rabbi.” So there we indicate that they had identified him not only as a prophet and from the priestly line, but as a teacher. “Rabbi” means teacher. “He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.” And these are disciples of John who go to John and say, “Our teacher, John, you’ve got to answer a question for us. The person you pointed to, He’s got all the crowds. They’re all going after Jesus. They’re all leaving you. They’re all going to Him and He’s now baptizing.”

“And John answered and said, ‘A man can receive nothing unless it’s been given him from heaven.’” There’s a verse to build your life on. “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but ‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’” “I am not the Christ.” “I am not the Christ.” In the next verse he uses an analogy, “I’m not the bridegroom. I’m just the best man.” “He must increase,” verse 30, “I must decrease.” So John knew he wasn’t the Messiah and he emphatically says, “I’m not the Messiah.” And so they ask him, verse 21, they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” Well, why would they ask a question like that? Elijah is long ago off the scene. Why do they ask that? They ask that because the final prophet, Malachi, said this of the coming of Christ, the coming of Messiah: “I’m going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.” Prior to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ in judgment, the great and terrible day of the Lord, Elijah will come. That’s a promise. That’s an Old Testament promise. Earlier in Malachi 3:1 he’s called the “messenger”--the messenger who comes before the return of Messiah to set up His kingdom.

The rabbis all got it. The Jews got it. The priests got it. The Levites got it. They all understood it. Before the arrival of Messiah will come Elijah. But it is before Messiah’s coming to judge. So we can say this, just for our understanding, that Elijah will come before the Lord’s Second Coming in judgment. Some would equate him with one of the witnesses of Revelation 11, verse 3, the two witnesses that come at the end. Elijah never died. Is that not true? He went to heaven. What? Yeah, he went to heaven in a chariot. So Elijah will come before the return of the Lord in the great and terrible day. So they say, “Are you Elijah?” Does this mean this is the coming of the King? And, of course, they thought the judgment would be upon the ungodly nations and they would be given the

kingdom. And he says to them, “No, I’m not. I’m not.”

You say, “Well wait a minute, wait a minute. Why would he say I’m not?” Because he wasn’t. He was John the Baptist. He didn’t exist before he was born. He’s not recycled Elijah. However--and here’s what you have to understand--the angel said he will come “in the spirit and power of Elijah”; with that kind of prophetic power and effect, turning people’s hearts back to God.

So understand it this way: two comings of Christ. The first coming he is preceded by one in the spirit and power of Elijah. Second Coming, he’s preceded by Elijah. So John is not the Elijah, but he is the one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. And it’s pretty clear throughout the testimony of Matthew and Luke that they understood that--that John was not Elijah but he was the one who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. You remember the great prophet who spoke the Word of God.

So they weren’t having much success trying to identify this guy. So they said, “Are you the Prophet?” “The Prophet?” Well that’s pretty vague, isn’t it? No, not really. They were talking about a specific Old Testament prophecy in Deuteronomy 18; in Deuteronomy 18 there’s a specific prophecy, verse 15, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to Him.” “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you. I’ll put my words in his mouth and He shall speak to them all that I command.” That’s Moses promising the coming of a prophet, a great prophet in the future, a prophet associated with salvation, restoration, the revelation of the Word of God.

The Jews throughout their history had seen that as a prophecy of the coming of Messiah, either the Messiah or someone coming at the time of Messiah would be that prophet. So these are questions that come out of their theology and their understanding of the Old Testament. They ask if he’s the Christ and then they ask, based on Malachi 4:5, “Are you Elijah?” And then based on Deuteronomy 18, “Are you that Prophet?”

And by the way, if you...if you want to know who that prophet refers to, it’s in Acts 3, because Peter in his second sermon on Christ talks about Christ suffering and he says in verse 19, “Repent and return, that your sins may be wiped away...and that He may send Christ, Christ appointed for you.” And then He goes on to talk about Christ and says this, “Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like Me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything he says to you.’” That’s quoted right out of Deuteronomy 18. So Peter in his second sermon identifies that prophet as none other than Christ. And it will be that every soul that doesn’t heed that prophet will be destroyed.

Stephen gave the same message in the seventh chapter of the book of Acts. Stephen identifies that prophet, I think it’s in verse 37. “Moses said to the sons of Israel, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.’”

So are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? And to all three questions he says, “No!” emphatically. And in verse 22 they say to him, “Who are you so that we may give an answer to those who sent us?” Now there’s the commission issue. They had been mandated and sent as an official delegation from the Sanhedrin, “What do you say about yourself? We need an answer.”

I love this. He said, “I’m a voice...a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” It reminds me of Paul in Ephesians 3:8 who said he was least, less than all the saints. John’s a voice. This is the essence of real greatness--humility.

What do you say for yourself? What do you say? “I’m the son of Zacharias, the esteemed priest. I’m the greatest man who ever lived, by the way. I’m a man who was, just for your information, filled with the Holy Spirit when I was still in my mother’s womb. He doesn’t say any of that, he just says, “I’m a voice.” “I’m a voice.” Just a voice. It reminds me of Luke 17:10 where it says that when we’ve done everything we ought to have done, we ought to say we’re only an unprofitable servant, I’m a slave--just a voice, just a voice. But I am a voice that is unique. “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.” I am a voice, but I am a voice fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 5. I am the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 through 5.

And what did Isaiah mean when he said “The voice of one crying in the wilderness?” Isaiah was talking about the coming of Messiah, and that before the Messiah would come He would be preceded by a voice crying in the wilderness: “Make the way of the Lord clear; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, every mountain and hill be made low; let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.” That’s a prophecy of John the Baptist. He says, “I’m that voice.”

Now listen, he was in a physical wilderness, he was in a geographical wilderness. But that’s not the point of the word “wilderness” in the prophecy of Isaiah, because when John came, he didn’t come with a bulldozer. He didn’t come and start moving dirt, filling holes and knocking down mountains. So in what way was he lowering mountains and elevating valleys and straightening out crooked roads and clearing obstacles off the path spiritually? Spiritually; the truth preacher of righteousness, a voice not attracting people to himself but to one of higher rank whose sandals He wasn’t worthy to untie. And He was saying, “Make straight,” He says in verse 23, “Make straight the way of the Lord.” Create a highway in your heart is what he’s after.

When we went through that as I read it to you earlier in another passage, I covered that in detail. The low places are the base things in life that need to be...that need to be brought up. The high things are the elevated self-righteous, prideful, hypocritical things that need to be brought low. The crooked things, the deviant things need to be straightened out. The clutter of life needs to be cleared off so

that the road is clean. This is all a part of the message of repentance. Deal with the issues of the heart, which is both wretched in its self-elevation and it's self-debasing.

And by the way, at the very moment that John was answering their question on day one, Jesus was walking toward John and would arrive the next day. I'm a voice. Not just a voice in the sense, I am the voice prophesied in Isaiah who has come to cry in the wilderness of sin and barrenness and crookedness and debasement and self-righteousness. Deal with your heart. Make the path straight. And they had been sent from the Pharisees.

"So they said to him, 'Why are you baptizing if you're not the Christ, and you're not Elijah, and you're not the Prophet? What are you doing? Who are you?'"

I'll tell you the answer to that and it will be his answer next time. Pretty dramatic, isn't it? We didn't even get through day one, sorry. Let's pray.

Father, we're so blessed and so grateful for the richness that is placed in our minds and our hands, our hearts, in Your Word, every word, every verse, every text, every account, every testimony is just so obviously supernatural from heaven. And we have communed with heaven today. We've offered up our prayers to heaven, and we've heard heaven speak through this chapter. Thank you for the testimony of John to the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You for sending Your Son into the world to seek and to save the lost. And may we all conclude that John did, that this is the Son of God. This One on whom the Spirit descended and of whom the Father said, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." And may we follow Him as did those disciples of John faithfully to the end, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, following Him. I pray for those who are in the wilderness of sin, whose hearts are barren and empty and filled with the pits of wickedness in the heights of pride and the turns of perversion and the stumbling stones of sinful clutter, that You would by Your Holy Spirit clear the way, and clear the path for the Lord. Do that today.

Father, we thank You that You have planted this in our hearts and minds. Use it, Lord, use it. May it not end here, may it not just be a bucket that receives something and holds it, but may we be like a funnel that what we hear we find ignites our hearts and fills our conversation both with those who know You and those who do not. Use this truth, Lord, and spread it in ways that we can't even now perhaps imagine for Your glory, we pray, and bless this congregation in every case, every life. May Christ be honored in us all, we pray in His name.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).