

## Bible Study Guide: Week of 12-7-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

### John 1:6-8, 19-28

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” <sup>23</sup>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.

<sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” <sup>26</sup>John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

**<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.**

Here John the Gospel writer tells us about John the Baptist (or Baptizer)—interestingly, John the Gospel writer (or Evangelist) never calls him by this title, but rather refers to him simply as John. This is somewhat confusing because we call this the Gospel of John. Remember that the Gospels were originally written anonymously and only later were the titles “according to John, Matthew, Mark, or Luke” attached to the Gospels. Aside from being a little confusing, John the Evangelist’s identification of John the Baptist simply as “John” highlights not his work of baptizing, but rather his role as a witness to and herald of the coming of Jesus.

In John 1:1-5 we read about the Word that was in the beginning with God and the Word that, indeed, *was* God, through whom all things were made and through whom all life came into being. In him, we read, was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. We read about this light and life and Word of God that is coming into the world. Here, we see John the Evangelist’s main focus when it comes to John’s role—he is one who witnesses to the light in order that all might believe through him. This theme of belief runs throughout the Gospel of John, beginning here. Further, John the Evangelist later states that his gospel was written for the express purpose of helping the reader come to believe in Jesus and to have life in his name (see John 20:31).

Interestingly, we read here that John was “sent from God.” This is in stark contrast to the characters who will come up momentarily, as we will see.

**<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”**

Again, John’s primary role in this gospel is to serve as a witness and testify to who Jesus is. He serves that role here when questioned by the religious authorities. Though John is described as “sent by God,” in contrast the leaders are “sent” by “the Jews.” We will later

see that they are sent, specifically by “the Pharisees.” “The Jews” in John’s gospel becomes a shorthand way of describing the religious leaders and establishment that stood opposed to Jesus during his earthly ministry. Historically, we know that Jesus himself, as well as all of his first disciples, as well as much of the early church were all thoroughly Jewish. So to say that Jesus said or did something to or with “the Jews” creates a divide that was not there historically. Again, this term “the Jews” is a shorthand way for John to refer to the people and leaders who were not receptive to Jesus’ message and who were, in John’s view, unable to believe in Jesus. In many ways it is an unfortunate choice of words because many of John’s words about “the Jews” have been used to denigrate and persecute Jewish people throughout the history of the church. We must be careful that we read these words in their proper historical context. John and his community of believers in Jesus had likely been expelled from their synagogue for their faith in Jesus. In that context, as a persecuted community of faith, it made sense for John to see in Jesus’ ministry a conflict with “the Jews” collectively. In our context, such generalization is inappropriate at best; dangerous and cruel at worst. We must avoid lumping all “the Jews” into particular categories and we certainly should avoid painting “the Jews” as a collective entity that stands against faith as John did. The challenge is to let John mean what John meant without taking on the baggage of his particular hostilities. For John, it is significant that John the Baptist came “from God” while the priests and Levites came “from the Jews.” Already, from John’s perspective, there is a battle between faith and lack of faith; belief and unbelief unfolding there by the Jordan river.

**<sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” <sup>23</sup>He said,**

**“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,**

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**as the prophet Isaiah said.**

John’s testimony is odd in that he primarily speaks in the negative—he says more about what he is *not* than what he is. Notice the emphatic language John uses: “He *confessed* and *did not deny* it, but *confessed*...” John goes out of his way to deny being the Messiah. John evidently recognizes in their question “who are you?” an implication that the priests and Levites expected John to be the Messiah. The leaders press John further, wondering if he might be Elijah come again (see Malachi 4 for the prediction of the return of Elijah prior to the coming of the Day of the Lord) or “the prophet” (perhaps a reference to the Mosaic prophet—see Deuteronomy 18:15-22). John denies both. The only role John allows for himself here is as the voice crying out to prepare the way of the Lord.

**<sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?”**

Again, we see the true origin of the priests and Levites—the Pharisees—a group who will, of course, be hostile to Jesus throughout his ministry. Here they question John’s activity of baptizing. Their question is implicitly hostile and almost carries the tone of, “Who do you think you are to be doing this baptism work?” Interestingly, John the Evangelist never directly states “John was baptizing with water for repentance” as the other Evangelists do. Rather, the obvious fact that John was doing this work of baptism lingers just beneath the surface of this story. It is clear that John the Evangelist knew good and well the stories of John the Baptist, but finds no use in repeating them in his gospel. Rather, again, John’s role as baptizer takes a backseat to his role as witness.

**<sup>26</sup>John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.**

John’s words here are very similar to the words reported in Mark 1, with one important exception. John adds that the one who is to come “stands among” the leaders/crowds. That is significant because it shows that John was aware that “the Word” had indeed already become flesh and was already dwelling among the people as we read earlier in Chapter 1. John also says that this one who is among them is one whom they “do not know.” This is an important theme in John’s Gospel—knowledge of the Son and, by extension, the Father is a central theme throughout the Gospel. See, for instance, John 1:10 ff. The existential question for John is this: Do you know God?

The mention of Bethany “across the Jordan” is interesting for two reasons. First, this is interesting because if you look at a map, “Bethany” may not show up where you expect it to based on this passage. Evidently, the Bethany “across the Jordan” an as-yet undiscovered village on the East bank of the Jordan. By contrast, the village we traditionally call “Bethany” is the village of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. It is on the outskirts of Jerusalem on the West side of the Jordan river. “*Beth ani*” in Hebrew means “house of figs” and would likely have been a common place name.

Second, this is interesting because Jesus’ first appearance on the scene in John’s Gospel happens in a place called Bethany on the East side of the Jordan. His last and greatest sign in John’s Gospel, the resuscitation of Lazarus, takes place in Bethany near Jerusalem on

the West side of the Jordan. Just as the people of Israel did during the Exodus, Jesus symbolically crosses over the Jordan into the Promised Land.

**Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

1. Review last week's account of John the Baptist from Mark 1. What similarities or differences do you notice with John 1? Why do you think Mark and John told this story differently?
2. Do you think John's testimony was convincing to the people asking him about his ministry? Why or why not?
3. Below is an image of the Isenheim altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald (c. 1515). It depicts a long-fingered John the Baptist pointing at the crucified Christ. Of course, John had been martyred prior to Jesus' crucifixion; this painting is more interested in theology than chronology. My seminary professor Dr. Tony Everett referred to this painting as "the bony finger." He said that our task as Christians is to, like John, be "the bony finger" pointing others toward Jesus. How can you, like John the Baptist, point others toward Jesus in your daily life?



*Isenheim Altarpiece interior*. C. 1515 by Matthias Grunewald. Unterlinden Museum, Colmar. Public domain.