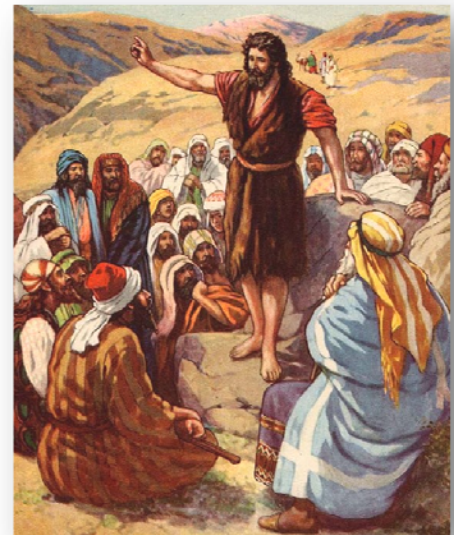


We have been introduced by John the disciple to the Word, the One promised since the beginning of the world, the One who is now come, in the first 18 verses of this Gospel. He did so in startling words and statements. He is going to further define and describe “the Word” (*even though he has not yet named Him!*) by using the testimony of John the Baptist.

We have deferred taking a detailed look at the “witness of the Light” until now, where we hear John the Baptist actually give testimony about “the Word.” We will begin this lesson with some details about this incredible man, and about whom Jesus made some amazing comments.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

- John the Baptist was the **forerunner of Jesus**, sent by God to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.
- He was of **priestly descent** from both parents (Luke 1:5-25, 56-58).
- Elizabeth and Mary, the mothers of John and Jesus, were either blood relatives or close kin. Both John and Jesus were **announced, set apart, and named by the angel Gabriel** even before their births.
- Very little is known about John’s boyhood, except that he was **filled by the Holy Spirit, even in the womb**. (Luke 1:44)
- He **lived as a Nazarite** in the desert. A Nazarite made a vow regarding three things: 1) not ever consume strong drink or wine, 2) never cut his hair [*apparently then it was considered shameful for a man to have long hair. Not cutting one’s hair symbolized one being willing to bear shame for God’s name*] and 3) never touch a dead body which would defile him (see Numbers 6).
- His first public appearance was carefully dated by Luke (3:1-2)
- His early ministry took place in the wilderness of **Judea and in the Jordan Valley**.
- His main theme of preaching was the **very soon coming of the Messiah**, and the Messianic Age (the age of the New Covenant), and the great need to spiritually prepare and be ready (repent!) John’s unique (God ordained and prophesied) mission was to prepare the way of the Lord. *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”* (Isaiah 40:3)
- John the Baptist put on the prophet’s hairy mantle with the same commitment and urgency of Elijah. Not only did he dress like Elijah, in camel’s hair and leather belt (2 Kings 1:8; Mark 1:6); he understood his ministry to be repentance and preparation, just as Elijah did (Luke 1:17). Jesus in fact called him “Elijah.” It was thought that Elijah would return from heaven to prepare the way for the Messiah (Malachi 4:5–6). John reminded the people of Elijah because of his dress and behavior (Matt. 11:14; Mark 9:12–13).



- Although they were cousins, it seems that John did not know Jesus was the Messiah until he saw the Holy Spirit descend on Him at his baptism. (*more on this later*)
- John challenged everyone who came to hear him to live righteously. That included tax collectors, soldiers and everyday people, Jews and Gentiles.
- John practiced **water baptism for spiritual washing and moral regeneration**. The Jews did not think they, God's chosen people, needed to be washed clean. They were, after all, the chosen people. Only Gentiles needed baptism, right? Wrong! John criticized the Jews for thinking this way and warned that they would be rejected unless they repented also. This did not sit too well with them.
- John the Baptist **prepared the way for Jesus not only in his ministry and the message he preached, but also in his death**. Jesus did not begin His ministry until John was arrested, and John's execution foreshadowed that of Jesus.
- John the Baptist had a **great following and loyal disciples** who were concerned about the growing popularity of this new Rabbi, Jesus. They refused to abandon John during his imprisonment, and provided loving care of his body. Even 20 years after his death he still had disciples (including Apollos in Ephesus). Some may have even thought of him with some Messianic thoughts, which compelled Paul to preach the superiority of Jesus.
- **Jesus expressed great appreciation of John**, declaring him to be more than a prophet, and that he was indeed God's messenger sent to prepare the way for him (Matt 11:10-19). He made some remarkable statements about his rough-haired cousin. *"...among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*
- He was the **last and the greatest of the prophets**. In many ways he was like Moses, who stood on the edge of the Promised Land, but did not enter it. John died before he could behold the "kingdom of God" proclaimed by Jesus, and what Jesus was referencing in the verse above.
- John the Baptist was thrown into prison by Herod Antipas, in a fortress dungeon called Machaerus, in the hills east of the Dead Sea. John was there a long time, perhaps thinking of himself as a failure. This is why he sent his disciples to ask Jesus *"Are you the coming One, or do we look for another?"* (Matthew 11:3). Jesus sent back a message assuring John.
- John was **killed because of his "too close to home" preaching to Herod's wife Herodias**. He had angered Herodias, by denouncing her for her sin of living in adultery with Herod. She was already married to Philip (Herod Antipas' brother), a Tetrarch in northern Israel. During a drunken feast Salome, Herodias' daughter, danced for Herod, now drunk, who promised to give her anything she wanted. She requested the head of John the Baptist...and got it.
- John, the author of this book, **does not spend any time describing John the Baptist**. He doesn't give us the details found in the other Gospels. John's focus here is on relating John the Baptist's role as the forerunner, the announcer, of the Messiah. The other details have already been told. John does not need to repeat them. This will often be the case as John's Gospel unfolds. He does not spend time and words on descriptions that have already been written in the other Gospels. He focuses solely on the importance of the message, the sign, the event – the person and the deity of the Messiah, Yeshua.

¹⁹Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

- John the Gospel writer now gets into the **actual witness of John the Baptist**, what he said about the Messiah. John will be presenting several “witnesses” to the Messiah. He provides detailed information and testimony from John the Baptist, from the disciples, from Jesus Himself and His miracles, His signs, and even from the Father.
- It did not take long for the “buzz” about this fanatical preacher to reach the Jews in Jerusalem. Whenever we see the term “Jews” in John’s Gospel, it will apply to the Jewish rulers, Pharisees, Sanhedrin, Sadducees, priests, etc. He is referencing those who had authority and position, not the common people. He uses this term about 70 times in this Gospel, and in most cases, it appears to be used in disdain, as those who opposed the Messiah.
- Here we see that some priests and Levites come to John the Baptist to check him out. The priests were supposed to all be Levites from the family of Aaron. This is what God required. However, the **priesthood was corrupted several years earlier**, and at the time of Jesus, the High Priest was appointed by Rome (usually to the highest bidder), and was not Levitical. The priesthood had become political, rather than holy and set apart according to God’s expectations. This is why the sect of the Essenes believed the priesthood to be corrupt (it was!) and why they had nothing to do with the Temple and separated themselves out in the desert.
- **John the Baptist was the son of a priest (Zacharias)**. This made him of natural interest to the priests in Jerusalem. This group sent from Jerusalem was not the appropriate, lawful priests according to God’s laws, but John was! And he did not conform to them. He was “suspicious” and they were going to find out just who he was, what he was doing, and why.
- They ask the question **“Who are you?”** John apparently knew what they were really asking, as is evident in his reply to them.



²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” ²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” ²²Then they said to him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

- John knows what these frauds are asking. They want to know if he is the promised Messiah. We have to understand here that the priesthood was corrupt, filled with men who most likely did not even believe in the coming Messiah. But John was stirring up trouble out here at the Jordan and they were going to quickly put his little show to an end if he claimed to be the Messiah. He answers clearly that he is NOT the Messiah. They didn’t directly ask him that, so he could not deny that, as the scripture says, but clearly “confessed” on his own he was not the Anointed One.
- **“What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”** Okay, so he is not the Messiah. Now they are essentially asking “then who ARE you?” Now they ask if he is Elijah. Traditionally, the Jews were expecting Elijah to come on the scene before the Messiah. This comes from Malachi 4:5 – **“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.”** The Jews knew that Elijah had not died (2 Kings 2:11) and was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. They believed the same prophet would come back to earth to announce the end time. John clearly states he is NOT Elijah.

- Zacharias, John's father, was told: ***"But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*** (Luke 1:13-17) John the Baptist came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" but he was not the literal former prophet Elijah in the flesh.
- Later, in Matthew 11:14-15, **Jesus essentially said that John the Baptist WAS that Elijah:** ***"And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*** Jesus meant that John was the fulfillment of this prophecy in Malachi, though he was not the original prophet Elijah himself. Jesus challenged people to hear what He was saying and understand that John the Baptist, and Elijah, were those crying in the wilderness, preparing people to receive the Messiah. It was true of His first coming, and will be true of His second coming. The actual prophet Elijah does appear, with Jesus, at His transfiguration (see Matthew 17)
- John the Baptist came to proclaim the Messiah, but all these Jews were interested in was who was John. They were intimidated and threatened by this true Levite and priest. They didn't really care about the Messiah, whom most did not even believe in.
- ***"Are you the Prophet?"*** Again John answered, "No." In the mind of these Jews, there were four possibilities of who John the Baptist might "think" he is. 1) He could claim to be the Messiah, 2) he could claim to be Elijah, 3) he could claim to be "the Prophet" or 4) he could be a false prophet, which is what most of them thought, and what they were most likely setting out to prove.
- In the Old Testament, when the Jews were approaching their entry into the Promised Land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses had plenty to say to them to prepare them. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses made a statement which every Jew knew. ***"The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear,..."*** ***"And the LORD said to me: 'What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him."*** (Deuteronomy 18:15, 17-18) They knew to expect this Prophet and now they were wondering if John claimed to be that Prophet. Jesus IS that Prophet! John knew his place well. He was merely the one who came to prepare the way. These questioners didn't seem to get that point. They didn't care about the One whom John was pointing to.
- ***"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?"*** These "Jews" couldn't think of anything else to ask John. They didn't ask about the One John was sent to prepare people to receive. They only wanted to know about him and now they ask him again, "okay, then, just WHO are YOU?" They are on a mission to find out about this upstart at the Jordan who is rocking the boat of the Jews in Jerusalem. They needed something to bring back to their superiors.

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."***

- John now clearly states exactly who HE is, by using the scriptures that prophesy of him. This is a beautiful passage that foretells the "herald" and forerunner of the Messiah. This speaks of the one who would announce the divine Shepherd.

- Isaiah the prophet wrote these words, inspired by the Holy Spirit:

¹“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God. ²“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

³The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; ⁵The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

⁶The voice said, “Cry out!” And he said, “What shall I cry?” “All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”



⁹O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

¹⁰Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, And His work before Him. ¹¹He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young.” (Isaiah 40:1-11)

- **THIS IS BEAUTIFUL!!** And it is being fulfilled right here in John chapter 1. This was a well-known passage, and these Jews, even the apostate, would have recognized it.

- It is helpful to understand that when a dignitary visited a place, the roads ahead of him were prepared for his arrival. Eastern roads were not surfaced, so when an esteemed visitor was coming,

those roads were made straight, smoothed out and put in order for his arrival. This is the ministry of John the Baptist. He is preparing the road for the King of Kings. He is preparing hearts to receive him, through the act of repentance and baptism.

- With John’s answer, he is really indicating that it does not matter in the least WHO he is. **What matters is what he does and what he says – WHO he points to**. His work of preparing hearts to receive their Savior is all that matters. What a lesson for us as well.

²⁴Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. ²⁵And they asked him, saying, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

- The “Jews” (among whom we hear are some Pharisees) are not finished in their questioning, however. They don’t like John’s answers, as they don’t give them any “ammunition” against him. So they go for more. Now they bring up the subject of baptism, and why he is doing it, and under what authority. Okay, if you’re not the Messiah, not the Prophet, not Elijah, just what gives you the right to be baptizing?

- There are a number of reasons these guys were justified, or at least believed they were justified, to be questioning John the Baptist. First, they were indeed **supposed to be guardians of Judaism, and as such were charged with seriously investigating any new or unusual forms of preaching** (which John's certainly was!). Secondly, if he was a prophet, they wanted to know his credentials. These first two reasons are scriptural and would indeed justify their questions. However, thirdly, and probably their biggest motivator, was the perception that John was a threat to their influence, and they were flat out jealous of his popularity.
- The **concept and act of baptism was not new at that time**. According to their understanding of the scriptures the Jews felt that if John was the Messiah, or Elijah, he could baptize (see Isaiah 52:15, Ezekiel 36:24-27, Zechariah 13:1). Baptism was the act of washing in water for cleansing, not the body, but the soul and the spirit. And, quite frankly, the Jews did not think baptism was for them. It was common for new converts, for Gentiles to Judaism, but not for the Jews. They believed they were already clean – they belonged to God and did not require baptism as the Gentiles did. For John to suggest that the Jews repent and be baptized was outrageous to them.
- It is important for us to understand that it is not the outward motion of being immersed or sprinkled in water that cleanses us. It is the blood of Jesus that does this. When we chose to be baptized, we are acknowledging this, and making a public and outward display of our desire to be immersed in Him, covered by Him. We are identifying with Him and His death and resurrection. **Many people get caught in the ritual, and forget the relationship**. The ritual is meaningless without the relationship with Jesus. Immersing in water makes us *temporarily* wet. Immersing in Jesus makes us *permanently* changed.

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.”*

- John doesn't waste any more time with the silly questions about his identity. It is not about him, it is all about the Messiah. He now begins preaching again, pointing to the One he was born to herald. Perhaps John knows that his preaching days are nearing an end, as the Promised One is on the horizon, and His ministry will begin soon. He knows he must “decrease” so the Messiah might “increase.” (see John 3:30) John will not waste his precious time on worldly arguments and confrontations. There is work to be done here.
- *“I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.”* John knew that his work was important as preparation, but was not the ultimate immersion, the baptism of fire. He again takes the spotlight off himself, and places it where it belongs, on the One coming that they, sadly, did not know. They didn't know Him because they weren't watching for Him. They weren't studying the scriptures and prophecies about Him. They were preparing their own hearts to receive Him. John is shouting out, in his own way, that Someone else, Someone much more important and with a much more complete baptism, is coming. John knew the cleansing provided by the One coming was far more important, far more complete, than the baptism he preached. *(We are reminded of public swimming pools, where those who wish to swim must first shower off the “street grime” before immersing themselves in the “big pool.” John's baptism was the same. He was there to get people to recognize they needed that washing, before they were immersed in the Messiah.)*

- In the other Gospels, we hear immediately that the **One coming will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit**:

“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”
(Matthew 3:11)

“I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:8)

“John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:16-17)

The references to fire are **clear indicators of judgment**, especially seen in the passage from Luke. Jesus will not only bring salvation, but for those who reject Him, there is judgment. In this Gospel of John, the writer waits until later to make this statement (see 1:33).

- **John fully understood his role and function.** He was not the Way, he only prepared it. In every glimpse we have of John, he is humble and accepting of his own role. He is not the one to look at. They are to look at the coming One, the Messiah Himself. This, as is every word and action of John the Baptist, is another lesson for us. We all have a role and function to play in the Kingdom, and while they are important functions, all roles, all roads, lead to Jesus.
- **Whenever we feel indispensable or too important**, we need to remember John the Baptist. The fact that God uses us to do his work, does not excuse pride. God does not NEED us, He enables and allows us to serve Him. It is a privilege, not a boasting right. Paul the apostle understood this, and so did John the Baptist. *Do we?* Yet, it is also important to balance this understanding with the knowledge of exactly who we are in Jesus – we are saved, washed, renewed and resurrected to eternal life. We are His treasure, His beloved children.
- **“One among you whom you do not know.”** This statement is a reiteration, and returns us to the opening statements John the author has made that the Word *“came to His own, but His own did not receive Him.”* (1:11-12) The Son of God had come in the flesh, and lived among the Jews, but the Jews, His own people, did not know Him.
- **“It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me,...”** John the Baptist is again speaking of the pre-eminence of the One coming. He makes this statement several times, so there is no misunderstanding. He may be younger and His ministry begins later (*“coming after me”*) but He who is coming has existed and has been God and pre-eminent from the beginning (*“preferred before me”*). He wants no question about the ultimate authority of the One he points to.
- **“...whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”** This was a common saying, and commonly understood in the days of John the Baptist. In these ancient times, a slave would perform many of the more menial jobs for a master, especially those on a daily basis such as making meals, cleaning clothes, housekeeping, etc. Unstrapping a sandal was considered even below a slave, since in those days garbage and waste was thrown into the streets and people walked through it, therefore this was a task most did for themselves (*this is also why foot washing was a necessity, we’ll have more on this in chapter 13*). If a slave was used to do this, it was the lowest slave in a rich household. John the Baptist declares here that he is unworthy even do this most disgusting of all menial tasks for the One coming.



²⁸*These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

“Bethabara beyond the Jordan ,...” This is also translated “Bethany,” and mentioned here in this way to distinguish this town from others of the same name (like Bethlehem Ephrata). This is not Bethany where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. Its exact location has not been determined. All we really know is that it was east of the Jordan River. This apparently was one of John the Baptist’s common areas for preaching and 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!”*

- The day after John is confronted by the Pharisees and other Jews from Jerusalem, and proclaims himself to be the voice crying out in the wilderness, the one who prepares the way for the Messiah, John sees Jesus among the crowds and makes a very startling statement.
- *“Behold! The Lamb of God...”* This expression is only found in scripture twice – here and in verse 1:36. John knew precisely what he was saying, but his audience was no doubt surprised and confused by this. A “lamb of God” meant a sacrifice. John is likely referencing the Passover sacrifice of a perfect unblemished lamb (see Exodus 12). It was probably near the time of Passover, as John the author references Jesus’ presence in Jerusalem for the Passover at the end of the next chapter. Paul referenced Jesus as “our Passover” in 1 Corinthians 5:7 *“Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.”* The people hearing John the Baptist would have immediately associated a lamb as a sacrifice, but the thought of this man he pointed to being that sacrifice most likely completely eluded and confused them.
- John, the son of a priest, was **well acquainted with the rituals of the Temple and all the sacrifices**. Every morning and every evening a lamb was sacrificed in the Temple for the sins of the people. John points to Jesus and says He is that Lamb! He is the One who will be sacrificed for their sins. While this probably shook up the people, sadly few of them fully understood his meaning.
- Isaiah prophesied about this Lamb: *“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”* (Isaiah 53:7) This is the “suffering servant” prophecy in Isaiah. The Jews were very familiar with this. They still are. In fact, this passage in Isaiah is one that causes a huge amount of controversy among Jews today. It is a clear prophecy about the suffering Jesus, the Messiah, would experience. Because His death so completely fulfills this prophecy and so clearly points to Him, the Jews still debate the possible existence of two Messiahs. One they call *Messiah ben Joseph*, which is the suffering Messiah. The scriptures clearly indicate the Messiah will suffer. Yet they were, and are, looking for the King Messiah. They call this person *Messiah ben David*, the conquering Messiah who is king. They have not yet reconciled the fact that there is only ONE Messiah, His name is Jesus, and He came once, and will come again. Not two Messiahs, but two “comings.”
- John the author also paints an amazing picture of the Lamb of God in Revelation 5: *“And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”* ⁷ *Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.”* (Revelation 5:6-7) In fact, John references the Lamb of God over 20 times in this book of Revelation.

- **“...who takes away the sin of the world!** The Hebrew word for “takes away” literally means to “TAKE UP.” Jesus did that literally, when he was hung on a cross, and lifted up. The author is indicating here also that the world has sins, and those sins need to be removed, or individuals cannot be with God. It is clear that redemption is necessary. A penalty is required for those sins, and that penalty is a debt due to God. When Jesus died, he uttered the Greek word *“tetelestai”* which we have translated “It is finished.” However, *tetelestai* literally means, PAID IN FULL.
- **The “sin of the world” is every person’s sins.** Not just for the Jews, but for all mankind. Jesus paid the penalty and thereby removed our sins. However, acceptance of this gift is predicated on our acknowledgement and sorrow over the sins – repentance.

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.”**

- Once again, John is **pointing AWAY from himself** – to the Messiah now come to fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies. John again makes the statement about the Man who *“is preferred before me,”* the preexistent nature of Jesus, fully man and fully God. John had a great following who listened to what he said, and respected him. He wanted the focus taken off himself, however, and wanted nothing (*including ancient traditions of affording the younger in a family less respect*) to stand in the way of the people’s embracing the Word he speaks of.
- **“I did not know Him; ...”** John was Jesus’ cousin. It is likely he KNEW, at least OF Jesus. Some suggest that John spent his life in the wilderness and didn’t even know Jesus. This does not seem likely. He knew of Jesus even in the womb! He recognized Him before either of them were born. He probably knew Jesus, as a cousin, but some say he did not know that he was the appointed one – the Anointed One (Messiah) – until John baptized Jesus. However, John knew full well who approached him to request baptism. Still the event he describes below (Jesus’ baptism, and the appearance of the dove representing the Holy Spirit, and the voice from heaven) was clearly a sign of the confirmation of the Messiah.
- **“...therefore I came baptizing with water.”** This may mean that John focused on doing what he was called to do, calling the people to repentance, and the subsequent physical act of baptism to signify that washing away of sins. This also indicates that he is aware that One comes after Him who will baptize with more than water. John has already indicated that the Messiah, the Word, will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. Here he indicates that he did this so that Israel might know her Messiah.
- John baptized with water, which was only in **preparation and for repentance.** It symbolized a choice made by the person to receive forgiveness, and the washing away of sins. In contrast, Jesus would baptize with fire (judgment) and the Holy Spirit, which would bring not only forgiveness, but also eternal life (and judgment to the non-believer).

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.”**

- We do not have a complete picture of this event in this gospel. We find the baptism of Jesus detailed in **Matthew 3 and Luke 3.** It marked the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

- *“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He* saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17) (*we do not know if the “he” here is John, or Jesus. That is why it is capped in this version. It is obvious John also saw it, however, as he proclaims here.)*
- *“And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove,...”* John proclaims he is an eye witness to this event, and literally saw with his eyes the sign of the dove, and heard with literal ears the voice of God. We don’t know if others gathered there also saw and heard these things, but John did, and proclaims his eyewitness.
- The **baptism of Jesus is a classic coming together in scripture of the Godhead**. The Son is present in the flesh, the Holy Spirit is present in the dove, and the Father is present in the voice from heaven.
- Throughout scripture, and tradition, **the dove has been a treasured symbol of God’s presence, His Holy Spirit**. In the ancient land of Israel, and throughout the region, doves were considered sacred. You could not hunt them or eat them. In Genesis 1:2, we read: *“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”* Jewish Rabbis said that the Spirit of God moved and fluttered like a dove over the emptiness and darkness. Jews loved and understood the picture of dove. It symbolized the very Spirit of God. And in His baptism, it again represented God’s Holy Spirit, and His presence with the Messiah.
- There are some well-known passages in the Old Testament that prophesy about this moment: *“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.”* (Isaiah 11:1-3) and *“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”* (Isaiah 61:1) Jesus quoted this verse in the synagogue and said he came to fulfill it. This was blasphemy to the Jews!
- *“...He remained upon Him....”* Not only did the dove appear above Jesus, He remained with Him. This was not a temporary sign; it signified the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus throughout His ministry.
- *“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.’* Again John says *“I did not know Him.”* This seems to indicate that He was not sure of the real identity of the Messiah. He probably knew his cousin, Jesus, but perhaps he was not sure that He was the Promised one. He also indicates that God is the One who sent John to announce the Messiah, and the One who provided this sign. We can debate about the sign, whether John knew beforehand or not, whether others saw the sign or not, but the presence of the dove and the voice were intended by God to be a clear sign of the Messiah, especially to John who would testify of this event.
- *“And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”* John is doing exactly what he was born to do: declare the Messiah. He adds that Jesus is not *just* the Messiah – He is the very Son of God. We will soon see and meet this “Word,” the coming One John pointed to, in the next verses.

