

Jesus and John the Baptist

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. It's a privilege to be here this morning. We're continuing the series! this morning on John's Gospel, and we're looking at Jesus and John the Baptist in John chapter 1,¹ and verses 19 to 34. So we're going to read those verses first from the version we use here, which is the New International Version, the NIV. So we're going to have the next slide, please.

Now, this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, I am not the Christ. They asked him then, who are you? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? He answered, no. Finally, they said, who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, I am the voice of one calling in the desert. Make straight the way for the Lord. Now, some Pharisees who'd been sent questioned him, why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? I baptize with water, John replied, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day, John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is the one I meant when I said, a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.

Then John gave this testimony. I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, the man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God. Amen and may God bless his reading of his word. Next slide, please. So, here they are, the cousins, not first cousins, Jesus and John the Baptist, but they were cousins. They were linked through their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth. Mary, the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, both of whom had miracle pregnancies.

[2 : 5 8] Mary, we know, or most of us will know the story of the Virgin Mary, who was visited by the angel who said, you shall have a child through the Holy Spirit.

And she gave birth to Jesus. Elizabeth was elderly. She was barren. She hadn't had any children. And the angel came to Zechariah, her husband, and said, Elizabeth is going to have a child.

And Zechariah didn't believe the angel. So, he was struck dumb until the baby was born. He was told that when the baby was born to call him John.

And this is what happened. When John the Baptist was born, the people said, what are you going to call him? And he said, John.

And this was very unusual. But he said, no, that's, I was told, the angel told me he is to be called John. And John the Baptist, when he was in Elizabeth's womb, leapt when Mary came to visit.

[4 : 11] Mary came to visit her cousin Elizabeth. And when the baby heard Mary's voice, the baby jumped in Elizabeth's womb.

Another part of that miracle pregnancy. Now, I don't know whether many of you here, many particularly, well, obviously the women, who've been pregnant, will have had babies that jumped in their womb.

I know that Emma certainly jumped in Anne's womb. And we had the opposite. When we played music, it would calm Emma.

It would calm Emma in the womb. She could hear the music. And babies, as we know, can hear things within the womb. And certainly music calmed Emma, my daughter.

So the baby jumped at Mary's voice. But of course, that was because the baby, John, who became John the Baptist, knew that Mary was to be the mother of the Christ, of the Messiah.

[5 : 15] So John lived in the desert. That's what we're told. He went and he lived in the desert. And Jesus lived in Galilee. So they weren't close cousins. They may perhaps never have met until Jesus came and asked John to baptize him.

We don't know. But John was a strange wild man who ate locusts and wild honey. A bit odd, you know, what would he do if somebody came in now and said, well, anybody got a bag of locusts?

Or a jar of wild honey? Wore a camel, a coat of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist. He was a sort of, you know, new age earth man there, really, with his camel hair coat and his leather belt and his wild honey and locusts.

So he was a strange, unusual man. Next slide, please. And before John the Baptist came, there was 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament.

And this is called the intertestamental period. So four years between Malachi, who's the last prophet to speak in the Old Testament, and Jesus, between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

[6 : 36] Now it's easy to think that God was not at work during this time. But that would be wrong. God may have been silent, but he was working.

He was working in history through cultural change and the rise and fall of empires. The Persian Empire had risen and fallen. The Greek Empire had risen and fallen. The Roman Empire had risen.

He was overseeing the Hellenization of Jewish culture, language, and philosophy. That's the assimilation of Greek culture, language, and philosophy, particularly in that part of the Middle East.

So that was going on all the time when the Greek Empire was at its height and from the time of Alexander the Great. He was allowing the development of new and influential Jewish groups like the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees, the priestly elite. The Sadducees, the aristocratic elite. All of this, God was allowing to happen. He was permitting the Roman Empire to help to aid spread the gospel when it came, particularly through the Greek language, which was the common language around that area of the world at that time.

[8 : 00] And travel. We all know the history of the Roman roads, how straight and well-made they were. There are still those Roman roads in evidence today in this country and elsewhere. So all of that was going on and God was allowing that to develop, ready for the gospel to go out into the world.

And he was letting the Jewish people be conquered. And this was giving them a deep-seated longing for Messiah. Over the troubles and the strife and the toils that they were going through, their longing for Messiah was growing all the time.

And along came John the Baptist and broke the 400 years of silence, so-called silence. Next slide, please. So John the Baptist.

Well, John the Baptist was certain what he was not. He answered the questions. He said, I am not the Christ. I am not the Messiah that the Jewish people were waiting for.

I am not Elijah. Elijah was one of the prophets from the Old Testament. No, he wasn't Elijah brought back to life. He said, no, I'm not the prophet.

[9 : 18] Now, this goes back to one of the earlier books in the Old Testament, the earliest books in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, chapter 18 and verses 18 and 19, which says, I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers.

I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.

So there's been interpretations about who this prophet was. Some people thought at the time it was Joshua who followed on from Moses. Muslims believe it's Muhammad that is spoken about here.

But most Christians believe that this was Jesus who was talked about as the prophet, who would come as the Messiah to Israel. And so John the Baptist said, no.

Again, he said, no, I am not the prophet. I am not Jesus. I am not the Messiah. Next slide, please. So what was John the Baptist? Well, Matthew chapter 3 and Isaiah chapter 4, he say, this is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

[10 : 38] So he was a forerunner. He preceded Jesus. He ran before Jesus to prepare things. He said he wasn't fit to untie Jesus' sandals.

Now that was the job of a slave. In those days, people would come in from the desert with dusty, dirty feet and the slave would come and untie the sandals and take the sandals off the feet of the person who'd been out coming to meet them, coming to the house across the dusty, dirty desert.

And John said, I'm not fit even to untie the sandals of the one who comes after me, of the Messiah. He was just the forerunner preceding Jesus.

He was a herald. Now, like me, you may have seen some of those old films or old television programs like Sir Lancelot and Robin Hood and Ivanhoe and many others where there were heralds who came and announced something.

And this is what a herald did. They went before the king. They cleared the road of debris and dust and dirt to make it a good path for the king. And sometimes you'd hear the herald, you know, oh, yay, oh, yay.

[11 : 55] That's what the herald was for the king who went before the king to ready the way for the king. That's what John the Baptist was, the herald before King Jesus.

He was a messenger. He was communicating his message to make Jesus famous. That's what his role was. His role wasn't to make himself famous or to make him the main man of the peace.

His role was the messenger to make Jesus famous. He called him the Lamb of God, the Son of God. Now, the Lamb of God reflected back to Exodus when the Jews were told when they wanted to get out of slavery in Egypt.

Tonight, God said, I'm going to Passover. And many of you will have heard the feast of the Passover that the Jews celebrate. I'm going to Passover tonight.

What I want you to do is sacrifice a lamb, a pure lamb, unblemished, and put the blood of the lamb on your doorposts. And then when I Passover, I'm going to kill the firstborn of everyone in Israel.

[13 : 08] But when I see a door with the blood of the lamb over it, they will be spared. And that's what the Jews were told to do. And that is where the Lamb of God comes from.

Jesus was the Lamb of God who shed his blood just as the blood of the lamb was shed for the Jews in coming out of Egypt. So the blood of Jesus was shed for everyone that we would know the Lord God.

Next slide, please. What else was John the Baptist? He was a witness. I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That's what a witness does, isn't it?

We've all seen it on, you know, on programs on the television or films. I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And that's what John the Baptist did. I have seen and I testify that this Jesus is the Son of God.

He was a witness. He told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He was a radical. He was baptizing Jews. The Jews came to be baptized by John.

[14 : 15] Now, the baptism at that time, if you were not a Jew but wanted to become a Jew, you went and got baptized in water.

But here was John baptizing Jews, saying to Jews, you are still not clean. You are still not pure. You need to be baptized in water and ready for Jesus, who will baptize in the Holy Spirit.

He was a speaker of unpleasant truths. He was calling out wrongdoing. Later in his life, we read the story where John calls out Herod, who was having an affair with Herodias, who was the wife of Philip, who was Herod's brother.

He was committing adultery. And John called it out. He stood up and he called it out and he said, no, that is wrong. And that was an unpleasant truth because it got him killed.

He was a mortal man. And then after that, Herod liked to hear John speak to him. But Herodias, when Herod said to Herodias' daughter, I'll bring you anything if you dance for me.

[15 : 38] I'll give you anything. And Herodias said to her daughter, ask him for the head of John the Baptist. So the daughter said, please give me the head of John the Baptist.

And he couldn't refuse. That's what he'd said. He would do anything. And so John's calling out of wrongdoing led to his death. So he was a mortal man.

He died. That was the end of John. Next slide, please. So what about Jesus? We've looked at John the Baptist and what he wasn't and what he was.

What about Jesus? Well, in Exodus, Moses, Moses, who is looking to lead the Jews out of Egypt, is told by God, tell them who I am.

And he says, well, what shall I say? What shall I say to the Jews about who you are, God? And he said, tell them I am who I am.

[16 : 46] Tell them I am has sent you. This was the name for God. I am. And so these seven I am's of Jesus are really important because Jesus was stating I am.

He was making it clear here when he said I am that he was God. I am. The seven I am's.

I am the bread of life. Now, when the Israelites were in the wilderness, God provided manna from heaven, food from heaven for the Jews to eat.

Now, they ate this food, this manna, as it was called, but they died. But Jesus said, I am the bread of life. Whoever eats the bread I give them will live forever.

I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. Jesus healed a blind man.

- [17 : 55] He gave him sight. He gave him light. And this links back to the very start of the Bible in Genesis when God said, let there be light and there was light.
- And there was Jesus bringing light to a blind man. And that's what Jesus does to us when we're not Christians, when we don't know God. That's what Jesus does.
- He brings light to us through the words that are spoken, through songs that are sent, through testimony of people, through witness of people. That's what God does. He brings light into our lives.
- The gate. I am the gate. This is the sheepfold. This is a metaphor for the sheepfold. The gate where that was the only way that the shepherd would go in.
- Anyone else who went into the sheepfold over the fence was a thief. So there's only one way into the sheepfold through the gate.
- [18 : 59] There's only one way to heaven through Jesus. So all the time Jesus was linking these things. I am the good shepherd.
- A shepherd looks after his flock, takes care of his flock to the point of death, would look after his flock and take care of it. That's where the money was for either him or for the person who owned the sheep.
- So the shepherd would look after his flock to the very point of death. No matter what it took through wind and rain and dark of night, he looked after the sheep. And that's what Jesus said.
- I am the good shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd, it says in the Psalms. And Jesus is the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life.
- In the Old Testament, it says, God's dead shall live. God's dead shall live. God's dead shall be raised to life. And here was Jesus saying, I am, I am, I am God.
- [20 : 06] I am the resurrection and the life, the life eternal. And then he says, I am the way and the truth and the life. He is the only way.
- He is the way and the truth and the life. There's no other way to know God except through Jesus. Jesus.
- The only way. He is the, brings the word of God and he is the upholder of all life. And he is the true vine, the sustaining power for those joined to Jesus.
- A vine, the branches of the vine cannot survive unless they are in the vine. Either they've grown naturally or they're grafted into the vine.
- Only then can they grow in strength and fruitfulness. And that's what Jesus is saying here. I am the true vine. You need to be grafted into me for fruitfulness.
- [21 : 10] I am the true vine. The sustaining power for those joined to Jesus. Now there are two other I am's in John's gospel.
- Those were seven metaphorical I am's, but there are two others. When he was talking with the Pharisees, he made the statement, before Abraham was born, I am.
- There is, Abraham was, I am. I am God. This phrase, I am. And then again in the Garden of Gethsemane, when they come looking for Jesus of Nazareth, he steps forward and says, I am he.
- And in fact, the English translation adds the word he, but the original translation, its thought, was just I am. Again, that I am.
- He is God. Jesus is God. Next slide, please. So what can we learn? We mortal beings, and we need to be, we need to be forerunners.
- [22 : 21] We need to be preceding Jesus returning. Jesus is going to return. And we need to go ahead of that and tell people and let people know that Jesus is returning.

He promises to return. We believe he will return. We need to be forerunners to that. We need to be heralds. We need to prepare the way. We need to tell people about Jesus so that they know and they have a chance to respond to his calling on their lives.

We are messengers. We have the responsibility of bringing that message and of communicating that message. That there's one way to the kingdom and that Jesus is returning.

We need to be witnesses. We need to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We need to testify about Jesus, who he is, what he's done in our lives, what he can do in other people's lives.

And then two others linked together, really. We need to be radical and we need to be speakers of unpleasant truths. We need to be radicals. We need to be counter-cultural.

[23 : 33] Our culture is a very difficult place for us who are Christians. Particularly around issues of sexuality, of gender, of end of life, of euthanasia, of abortion.

A lot of these things are things that make it difficult for Christians when we speak out. Cancel culture. When Christians speak out, they can risk being cancelled and not having that opportunity.

So we need to be radical about this and to be counter-cultural. And we need to be speakers of unpleasant truths. Abortion.

A quarter of a million abortions in the United Kingdom every year. That is an unpleasant truth. We need to be telling these unpleasant truths and be ready and able and willing to tell some of these unpleasant truths.

the question of gender. God says, I made them man and woman. Two genders.

[24 : 44] Not six genders, not four genders, not a hundred genders, two genders, God says. Man and woman. And these are unpleasant truths in our culture sometimes now.

So we need to be radical. We need to be speakers of unpleasant truths. And perhaps the most unpleasant truth of all, that Jesus is the only way. Whoever has to come through me to go to the Father.

That's what Jesus says. And that can be an unpleasant truth for many people. But it is the truth that Jesus is the only way. There is no other way to God but through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

and many of us here will tell those perhaps who are here who don't know that the best decision we made in our lives was to accept that Jesus is the only way and to make that decision to follow him.

Next slide, please. Now, I have here in my pocket something. Does anybody know what this is here?

[25 : 56] Sorry? A little black book. It is a little black book, yes. Apart from being a little black book, Sandy. Thank you. It's a New Testament that was given to soldiers who wanted one in the First World War who were serving in the First World War.

See, it's all linked. We're clever, you know. We've got all this Remembrance Day and here we are. So, every soldier was offered one of these. Not everyone got one but everyone who wanted one was given one.

And they were known to save soldiers' lives. They put them in their pocket and there are stories of bullets which were deflected by the New Testament.

Now, this New Testament belongs to Anne's grandfather or belonged to Anne's grandfather who was a Christian. Many of the pages are turned back.

He's got little notations and scribbles in it and notes of marks where he wants passages to be reminders to him in the trenches.

[27 : 03] He fought in northern France and Belgium. He was at the Somme with the Royal Irish Rifles. And one passage from the reading I gave earlier says in the King James Version, The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him and saith, Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.

And in the NIV that says the next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by he said, Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And that's one of the passages that's highlighted here. And he had a wife and four children at home in Northern Ireland in a little village called Moss Side, a sort of one road village.

And off he went to fight the war in Northern France and Belgium. And terribly sadly he was killed on the 25th of October 1918 in Belgium.

It says in here that he died, somebody had written in that he died on the 25th of October in France. That shows how nobody really knew where the border, the French-Belgian border was, but he actually died in Belgium.

[28 : 19] We've been to visit his grave. And more sadly still, his family didn't find out that he died until well after the armistice, which is terribly sad.

They thought he'd be coming home and then they got the terrible news that he wasn't. But he knew his Lord and Saviour. He knew the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Do you know the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? If you don't, then please talk to somebody today. Talk to John, talk to me, talk to Andy, anybody else from the fellowship here will be only too pleased to talk to you.

You need to make the decision. We've had the time of the law, which was when the Jews in the Old Testament, we're in a time of grace, but there will come a time of judgment when Jesus will come back.

And you need to make your hearts right. You need to make that decision to say to Jesus, I'm sorry for what I've done, for the wrong things I've done, the wrong things I've said.

[29 : 29] Please come into my heart, cleanse me, and help me to serve you. And that is the best decision you can ever make. Amen.