

John the Beloved began his gospel with a prologue describing the eternal Son of God and His manifestation as a man. He now continues with the prophet John's testimony to make his case that he is not writing these things without reason. The people of Judea knew that John the Baptist was a prophet. They held him in high regard, so what John the Baptist had to say about Jesus was a very important confirmation of John the Beloved's message.

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." The Levites and priests had come at the request of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They had to find what all the stir was about. At the time, Annas held the power behind the religious institution that dominated Jewish worship. He wanted to keep things under his control, and this prophet in the wilderness was causing quite a commotion. They basically came to say to him, "Who do you think you are!" That isn't really a question as much as it was an accusation.

Their main worry was that he might claim to be the Messiah, the anointed one. That would usurp all their authority and end their religious profiteering. But to give you an idea how paranoid the religious leaders were, I have to describe John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was the son of an elderly couple, Zechariah (who was a priest) and Elizabeth. (Luke 1:5-7) An angel that spoke to Zechariah foretold his birth when he was in the temple performing a sacred duty. They most likely died when John was young. He went off into the wilderness and lived an ascetic life. Then he began to call out to passers by to repent. Those who repented, he baptized as a sign of a cleansed life. You have to picture the man, sun burnt face, wild hair and beard and even wilder eyes, course camel hair cloak probably salvaged from a dead camel. He may have even had a few welts from the bee stings he got while robbing honeycombs. He thrusts his rod in the air and yells, "Repent!" Is he crazy, or is he the real thing? (Luke 3:3)

The people of Judea knew he was the real thing. He was such a contrast to the wealthy priests that those in search of true faith flocked out to hear him denounce the self-seeking world in which they lived. (Luke 3:11-14) It wasn't so much the lowly man that the powerful religious leaders feared. It was his authenticity and power of the Holy Spirit by which he spoke. The contrast was too revealing.

John's answer probably spared his life but still instilled fear in the hearts of those religious leaders. He confessed freely he was not the Messiah, the long awaited anointed One. They didn't have to worry about that. But he was still teaching without authorization from Jerusalem, so they continued with, "Who do you think you are then!"

²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." The Jews believed that Elijah would come before the Messiah to announce his coming. (Malachi 4:5) John said he was not Elijah. He was not Elijah reincarnated. He was not Elijah returned from heaven. He was the son

Commented [notes1]: 5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. Luke 1:5-7 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke 3:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 11 John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." 12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" 13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. 14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." Luke 3:11-14 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: Malachi 4:5 (NIV)
5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.

of Zechariah and Elizabeth. But he did come in the power and spirit of Elijah. The anointing that was upon Elijah was upon him. The angel that announced his birth declared, ¹⁷ *And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous--to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*" Luke 1:17 (NIV) Surely his parents taught him that as a child. So, no, he wasn't Elijah, but he was the predicted one that would prepare the way of the Lord.

They asked if he was the Prophet? Moses had foretold of one that would come similar to himself to whom everyone must listen. (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18) It was a prophecy of the coming Savior, the Messiah. John said, "No!" These were there three (some say four) big predictions that worried religious leaders. Some saw the Messiah and the Prophet as different persons. While the people longed for the coming of these ones that were predicted, the religious leaders feared their coming. They would be exposed for their greed and lose their authority and power. Up to this point they heard everything they hoped to hear.

²² *Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"* "So what are we supposed to tell the big cheeses back in Jerusalem? What gives you the right to preach without a license?"

There may be another source of tension behind the story. The leaders in Jerusalem were Pharisees and Sadducees. There was a third group that was prominent at the time, the Essenes. John's way of life was very much like that of the Essenes. The Essenes did not respect the other groups and felt that they had not only compromised with Rome but were off base in their religious interpretations as well. The Essenes put their hope in the coming Messiah and in a future war in which the sons of light would overcome the sons of darkness. As long as they stayed in their desert communities and away from Jerusalem, they didn't seem to be a threat. But if John was one of their evangelists, wooing people to the other side in the battle for the minds and hearts of the people, that meant trouble for the religious leaders. It was important to Jerusalem to find out what was really going on.

²³ *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.'"* John answered with Scripture which means he must have had access to scrolls or memorized parts as a youth with his priestly father. He was quoting Isaiah 40:3 It was the same Scripture the Essenes applied to themselves. This didn't really answer the concerns one way or the other.

"In the days of Solomon, basalt highways were made so that people would have an easier time on their journeys to the feasts of Israel. Someone in that time wrote that there were three miseries in life, sickness, fasting, and travel. Solomon tried to alleviate the last misery, but traffic and weather would damage the roads. The only time they would be repaired and made smooth was when a letter went out stating that the king was coming that way. John is saying, 'The King is coming, and you better do the work to make the path into your heart a straight and level the road for you are about to see the glory of God.'" From the sermon Big Bad John

Commented [notes5]: 15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. Deut 18:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 18 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. Deut 18:18 (NIV)

So John the Baptist was telling them, I'm not what you're afraid of but He's coming! That was almost as bad, for the religious leaders that is. He was preparing people for the One that was coming, telling them to get the path to their heart prepared for Him to enter. The time was approaching, and John the Baptist was God's warning letter.

John the Beloved is writing about this to convince people that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh for our salvation. I want to take a sidetrack from that main theme for just a minute to remind us that our message is similar to John the Baptist's message. -The King will return! Just as sure as He fulfilled many prophecies in His first coming, He'll fulfill the rest in His second coming. We are telling people the same thing John preached, "Repent! Change the way you think. It's not all about what will please you! The Lord is coming. Prepare your heart to receive the Lord. Remove anything that is in the way. When He arrives, you don't want to be caught snubbing Him by your rebellious life. – That is our message isn't it? The only difference is that we have the rest of the story, the life of Jesus, to tell them exactly how they can prepare the way in their heart for the Lord by receiving the forgiveness He purchased on the cross. (Matthew 26:28)

²⁴ Now some Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" Didn't they hear him? It's amazing how man can be so set in their way of thinking that they can't really participate in a conversation. John just told them he was baptizing in preparation for the coming Messiah, but the Pharisees just keep trying to tell him he isn't credentialed. The implication is that he had better stop before he gets in trouble. The public was more sensitive to the Holy Spirit in John's message than the religious leaders were! The same scenario will repeat in the ministry of Jesus. (Matthew 21:23)

²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. John isn't driven off message. He already told them why. They won't hear it if he tells them a hundred times. Instead, he drove the point home from another angle. "The One, the Messiah, that Prophet, is already here and you don't know Him. You are worried about authority to baptize with water. You should be more concerned about another type of baptism, the kind only He can perform."

The other Gospels record John adding that this One that is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire! (Matthew 3:11) The religious leaders couldn't regulate that. They never will, because they can't do it. Only Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. We might stand in and pray for the outpouring on a life, but we can't give Him. Jesus gives Him to the repentant humble heart that is willing to receive. (Luke 11:13) "...and with fire"; fire was a purifying agent. (Isaiah 4:4) It is the fire of the Holy Spirit that cleanses our lives. Lives aren't changed unless the transforming fire of the Holy Spirit sweeps through those areas of our life.

John is as bold as they come. The establishment is challenging his credentials and he is telling them the only credential that counts is God's anointing, and they didn't have it. He said of Jesus, His winnowing fork is in his hand and He will gather His grain but thoroughly burn up the chaff. (Matthew 3:12) That is in their face! He was telling the religious leaders that some of them were of no substance and would soon be fuel for the fire. If you saw the encounter in today's setting, you'd probably think the guy was

Commented [notes7]: 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Matt 26:28 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Matt 21:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Matt 3:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Luke 11:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: 4 The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Isaiah 4:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Matt 3:12 (NIV)

stark raving mad and maybe a little dangerous, unless you were sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Then you'd shudder at the thought of its fulfillment.

Another time, John the Baptist saw the religious leaders spying on him and he challenged them, "*Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath, you brood of vipers.*" (Matthew 3:7) Like baby snakes fleeing from a grass fire! What a description!

²⁷ *He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.*" John was humble but bold. He was saying, "You ask me if I'm the Messiah; I'm not even worthy to untie his sandals." We might get some insight into the expression when we consider a quote from Rabbi Joshua b. Levi (A.D. 250). "...all manner of service that a slave must render to his master, the pupil must render to his teacher – except the taking off of his shoe." (b. Ketub. 96a) If the tradition was the same in the first century, this was an expression that the Messiah was unsurpassed in greatness. John actually was his servant, a servant of God.

Sometimes, I think we get a little too familiar with Jesus. We know Him as friend and that is a good thing. (John 15:15) We run to Him with every little thing. I think He wants us to. But do we realize that without the gift of His righteousness, we aren't worthy of doing the most humbling job for Him? What an incredible honor then that He would make His home in us and work through our lives! (John 14:23)

John the Baptist was already experiencing a great honor, to be the one that announced the coming of Messiah. He realized that without the Holy Spirit, he wasn't worthy to do the least little thing. Do we realize that? We share Christ with people and share, in a small way, have the same honor that John experienced. Yet we are just as unworthy or more so. What a gracious God! I hope we all have a vision for the honor we have of serving our Lord in any way. (Revelation 22:3)

²⁸ *This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.* Archeologists believe they have found the place where this happened. They have discovered big baptismal pools in the country of Jordan that are believed to have been built for early pilgrims who wanted to be baptized in the same place that John baptized Jesus (Wadi Kharrar). The place is not so important as the message. The message was, "I am nothing. He is everything! You better get ready. Go tell **that** to the powers that be."

²⁹ *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* The baptism of Jesus had already taken place, and the Holy Spirit had revealed to John the Baptist that Jesus was the One. So when John saw Jesus, he pointed Him out to his disciples. "Look! There He is! He is the One that all the thousands of Passover lambs throughout our history represented." The lambs of Passover did not take away sin (Hebrews 10:4), but helped the people look forward to God's provision that would. Every lamb that was sacrificed reminded them that the Lord saw the blood and passed over those who were safely inside the blood stained door. (Exodus 12:13)

Again we see the all inclusiveness of John's gospel in the phrase, "*the sins of the world.*" Just as Moses had led the children of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt, so

Commented [notes13]: 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Matt 3:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. John 15:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 23 Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. John 14:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. Rev 22:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: Hebrews 10:4 (NIV) 4 because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Commented [notes18]: 13 The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. Ex 12:13 (NIV)

now a Deliver had come that would lead all people out of the bondage of sin. (John 8:34-36) There was a hint of the all inclusiveness of God's salvation even in the Passover instructions in the Book of Numbers. Gentiles could join in the Passover Feast as long as they followed the same instructions along with the Jewish people. (Numbers 9:14)

This revelation of the Lamb of God is the focal point of John the Baptist's message. He lived to reveal the Messiah and the Messiah's reason for coming. As I have shared with you before, there is a great effort in seminaries to denounce the idea of atonement. John the Baptist spoke in a culture that lived their lives enveloped in the idea of atonement. The lamb that took their place on the Day of Atonement and the Passover lamb brought great relief to their sense of guilt, even though they soon felt guilty again. When they thought of lambs, they thought of sacrifice and atonement, the forgiveness of sins. John declared that Jesus was God's Lamb, who takes away the sin of the world. There was no debating of the intended meaning of the statement in that day. This is what John the Baptist came to declare.

³⁰ *This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'* ³¹ *I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.* "John was born five months before Jesus, but John realized that Jesus existed before him. John was a cousin and yet until an important event took place, he didn't know for sure that Jesus was the One. The event that convinced him was the baptism of Jesus.

³² *Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him."* ³³ *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.'* The Spirit of God had revealed to him that this would happen to someone. When he saw it happen to Jesus, he knew Jesus was the Messiah. He knew He was the One that would baptize with the Holy Spirit, just as the prophet Joel had predicted would happen in the latter days. (Joel 2:28-29)

It is fascinating to see that John the Baptist somehow knew that the Messiah was the sacrificial Lamb of God. Most people in that day believed the Messiah would be a conquering king. The Essenes believed He would lead them to victory over not only Rome but the unbelieving and compromising Jews, the sons of darkness, as well. How did John the Baptist know Messiah was a lamb, when the rest of his culture thought He would be a powerful king? He listened to the Holy Spirit. He quoted from Isaiah, and perhaps he saw it in Isaiah 53:7, *"He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth."*

³⁴ *I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.* "That is John the Baptist's testimony. He pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the world's sin but who is also the Son of God. If you don't believe the glorious declaration of John 1:1-18, then believe the testimony of the last prophet, John the Baptist. Believe that bold man who stood in the face of the powers of this world and declared truth. He would die for that boldness (Matthew 14:3-4), but he would never back down from

Commented [notes19]: 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:34-36 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: Numbers 9:14 (NIV) 14 "An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must do so in accordance with its rules and regulations. You must have the same regulations for the alien and the native-born."

Commented [notes21]: 28 'And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. Joel 2:28-29 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 3 Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, 4 for John had been saying to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." Matt 14:3-4 (NIV)

declaring the truth. He unflinchingly declared it before religious and secular leaders.
May God help us to be as bold and consistent as we give our testimony!