

BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD

John 1:19-34

Ben Franklin once said —

“Many people die at twenty five and aren’t buried until they are seventy five.”

That’s 18,250 days...to live for something...to live with intention...to live with purpose. Without being clear on who you are, what you are doing, and why you are doing it, you are simply existing — not living....It’s a death of 18,000 unfulfilling days.

Søren Kierkegaard in his journal dated August 1, 1835 wrote...

“What I really need is to get clear about what I must do... What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do...to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die...this is what I now recognize as the most important of all. This is what my soul thirsts for as the African deserts thirst for water.”

Our souls thirst for more than mere breathing. We thirst for meaning and purpose to know what it is that we are willing to live and die for.

IDENTITY

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”

Context - From the four gospels, we know that John is out in the wilderness near the Sea of Galilee on the east side of the Jordan River. This would be far north Israel about 75 miles north of Jerusalem. And John has been out in the wilderness and people have been coming in droves to hear him preach and to be baptized.

Word is getting out about John and apparently its reached the City of Jerusalem and the Jewish Leadership sends a delegation on a recon mission to find out more about John the Baptist.

Are you the Christ?

Remember — the word Christ is not Jesus’ last name. It’s the Greek translation of the Hebrew word — Messiah, which means “anointed one”. Throughout the Old Testament — prophets, priests, and kings — were set apart — anointed to serve God and lead God’s people. And as the Biblical story unfolds, God promises not to send another temporary messiah — but to send The Anointed One — The Messiah — to deliver and rule his people once and for all.

Are you Elijah?

Elijah was a prophet and you can read about his life and ministry in the book of Kings. And the Bible tells us in 2 Kings Chapter 2 that when he transitioned his ministry to Elisha, he was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven.

And later in the book of Malachi, the prophet says that God would send a messenger — Elijah the prophet — to prepare the way for the Lord. And during that 400 year period of silence, there were other Jewish writings that suggested that the ascended Elijah himself would return back to earth. And the Bible tells us that they actually dressed similar. So the question isn’t totally out of place.

Are you The Prophet?

Before Moses died he said that one day God would send another prophet like him...one of his caliber who would lead the people in the truer, greater, and final Exodus.

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— (Deuteronomy 18:15)

John says — Nope, I’m not the guy — I’m not The Christ. I’m not Elijah returned from Heaven, nor am I the Capital P — Prophet.

22 So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 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.”

John says — I am merely a voice — crying out in the wilderness — Make straight the way of the Lord.

This is a quotation of Isaiah 40:3...

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Isaiah pictures a highway being made from the wilderness to the city — a highway for God to return.

In Ancient times, it was common for people to clear a path and make a way into their city for visiting dignitaries and kings. Isaiah goes on to say the way should be straight, level, and free of obstacles.

John says — I’m the messenger. Letting you know that the King is coming. So let’s get to work and prepare for his arrival. The messenger isn’t the point. The King is the point. The messenger doesn’t call attention to himself - but to the coming king.

The metaphor of preparing a highway that is straight, level, and free of obstacles is a picture of repentance. John is saying, we need to prepare for the coming King — the Lord himself. We must renew our minds — taking our opinions and feelings of right and wrong and straightening them out by the objective standard of God’s word. We must level our hearts — taking all the disordered loves and uneven priorities and reordering them so that God has our highest attention, deepest affection, and greatest allegiance. We must remove the obstacles that get in the way of our commitment to following God.

To truly repent means that you are appalled by your sin. It means you change your behavior. And it means you’re awestruck by forgiveness.

John says — that’s who I am. I’m a voice — a messenger — preparing the way for the Lord.

John 1:6–8

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

When it comes to our Identity — we need to be clear on both who we aren’t and who we are. John didn’t think more highly of himself. He knew he wasn’t the focus. He wasn’t the Light — he merely points to the light.

John didn’t put the focus on self-promotion. John didn’t try to build a platform or even create an identity for himself. He received his identity from God.

And the good news of the gospel is that in Christ — you and I receive an identity greater than any we could ever build for ourself. In Christ — we are forgiven sinners and beloved - adopted children of God the Father. We are liberated slaves and rescued citizens of God’s Kingdom. We are one with Christ, being renewed and transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Identity answers the question — Who am I? The first step to truly living is asking — who am I?

So much of our life is exhausted on trying to build an identity from scratch instead of receiving the identity that God only God can give.

Pastor Tim Keller says — Our need for worth is so powerful that whatever we base our identity and value on we essentially 'deify.' We will look to it with all the passion and intensity of worship and devotion, even if we think ourselves as highly irreligious.

So who or what are you basing your identity on?

MISSION

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

The Pharisees were a group of Jews who were hyper-concerned with following every minute detail of the Law of God as they understood it — with the emphasis one how they understood it. They created extra laws on top of God’s law. If you were to describe the Pharisees with one word it would be — Scrupulous or Nit-picky.

It’s not that following God’s law is wrong — but building your self-worth on how well you follow God’s law is a recipe for pride and if you are really good at it — you have a tendency to shame others who don’t. So it’s this group that starts in with the next line of questioning. If you aren’t the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, then why are you baptizing people? What business do you have doing what you’re doing? By what authority then do you baptize?

At this time, it’s not that baptizing was unknown. It’s just that it didn’t look anything like what John was doing.

Some groups practiced conversion baptism — if someone converted to Judaism they would be baptized. Some in the monastic community would be baptized daily as a sign that they were cleansing themselves spiritually. But in either case, a person would baptize themselves.

But here, John is administering baptism. And he’s baptizing Jewish people who are already Jewish who aren’t part of some monastic community. These are everyday people coming to John to be baptized as an outward sign of their inward repentance.

And since John is doing this without the authorization of the Jewish Leadership — they have questions.

26 John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

John doesn’t answer their question or reveal the authority that authorizes and legitimizes his preaching and baptism ministry. He basically says — guys you are missing the point. You’re concerned about my pedigree and my authorization...and you’re missing the one I’m point to.

John is saying...I’m just the opening act. And you’re going to miss the main event.

They were asking him if he was the Christ and John says — He's here and you haven't recognized him. And his worth and dignity is such that I'm unworthy to untie his sandal strap.

In this society the task of removing sandals and washing feet was carried out by servants — the lowest class. John is saying — compared to the worth of Jesus — I'm below a servant — I'm not worthy enough to even untie his sandal. John has seen something in Jesus that has produced in him a humility and a focused desire to serve and fulfill the mission given to him.

This is genuine humility that doesn't think more highly of himself than he ought — but doesn't think too lowly of himself either. He has a right understanding of who he is and who Jesus is.

Humility is the freedom from the need to constantly prove yourself — because the focus is on God and his worth, and what he says about you and what the mission.

John was clear about his mission and it produced a steadiness in him. There's a lesson here for us from John's life as it relates to mission — what are we to do with our life?

Remember, if Identity answers the question, Who am I?, Mission answers the questions, What am I to do?

In terms of the exact specifics — what career, where to live, what hobbies to take up, marriage, family, etc., there aren't verses in the Bible that give you your detailed specifics.

The Bible doesn't work like that. We work out the specifics of our as we consider how God has made us and as opportunities come our way. We work that out through prayer and in community with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

But here's what we can say...

For the Christian — no matter the specifics of our profession and calling and the details of our life — the principle we can learn here is that we are all called to point to Christ. That is clearly exemplified here and taught broadly in the New Testament.

When Jesus commissioned his current disciples and his future disciples he said it like this —

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

John was called to point to Jesus in a specific place at a specific time for a specific purpose. And here's the beauty of Christianity — we are too. We are called to point to Jesus in a specific place, at a specific time for a specific purpose.

Brother and sister, God has placed you where you are — at this time in history to be his voice to point to Jesus.

People don't need to be impressed with us — they need to be impressed with Jesus.

NY Times Columnist David Brooks — writes about how at college commencements we give graduates nothing but empty boxes of worthless advice.

He writes,

Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passions. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self-trust. (Road to Character)

The graduates are in limbo, and we give them uncertainty. They want to know why they should do this as opposed to that. And we have nothing to say except, Figure it our yourself based on no criteria outside yourself. They are floundering in a formless desert. Not only do we not give them a compass, we take a bucket of sand and throw it all over their heads!" (Second Mountain)

Jesus doesn't throw buckets of sand on our heads or leave it up to us to figure out our ultimate purpose and meaning in the world. He gives his disciples the dignity and the worth that comes with joining him in his mission. Jesus came to seek and save the lost – and our purpose and mission is found in pointing people to him.

It reminds me of an old Gospel Song from the Williams Brothers. The Chorus goes like this:

I'm just a nobody trying to tell everybody, about somebody, who can save anybody.

This captures the identity, the mission, and the vision of John the Baptist. He was humble – He didn't think more highly of himself nor did he think too low of himself. He had an identity given to him by God and that was enough for him. He had a clear mission – tell everybody about Jesus. And He had a vision that Jesus Christ could save anybody – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

VISION

32 And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

If Identity is about who you are and mission is about what you are to do, then vision is why you are doing it.

Vision is the picture of what could be with the conviction that it should be.

In these verses John tells us about what he saw in Jesus that gave him a clear, compelling, and courageous vision for his life.

Now in verse 32, we find out that it was in fact God who authorized and commissioned John in his preaching and baptizing ministry.

And in this same verse, John tells us about the time when he baptized Jesus.

Now, remember, John had been baptizing people for some time now. People would hear him preach and respond by being baptized. And then he would go out and do it the next day and so on.

But when Jesus came to be baptized, something altogether different happened.

When he came, the other gospels tell us that the heavens opened up and God the Father spoke and said, "This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased." And the Spirit of God descended from heaven like a dove and it remained on Jesus.

God had told John the baptist that when he saw the Spirit descend and remain — he would know he had found the Messiah — the Son of God.

John baptizes with water — but the Son of God would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Now at this point, John doesn't go into much detail. He will cover the Holy Spirit later in his Gospel. But readers who are familiar with the Old Testament would know that the Holy Spirit is the giver of life — where the Spirit of God is — there is life. John can baptize with water to symbolize repentance — Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit to bring regeneration — to bring new life.

John saw a clear and compelling vision of Jesus that gave him courage to live.

When John baptized Jesus Christ — it changed him. He had courage for the mission and with boldness he could point to Jesus. And that's exactly what we see in verse 29.

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

The idea of the lamb of God — an innocent sacrifice in the place of another — is a strand that runs through the Bible.

The first notion is in Genesis 22 when God called Abraham to go to Mount Moriah and offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. As father, the notion is unthinkable. But Abraham trusted in the character and nature of God. He knew that God is a God of life and trusted that even if the unthinkable happened — God could raise his son from the dead.

And before Abraham could go through with the sacrifice, God stopped him and provided a substitute — a ram caught in the thicket nearby — an innocent sacrifice in the place of another.

In the book of Exodus, plague after plague is unable to break the hardened heart of Pharaoh. The final plague is the death of the firstborn son. The angel of death was coming and the only way to survive was to take shelter under the blood of the passover lamb. Every house who believed in God, trusted his word and took a lamb without blemish and spread the blood on their doorposts. And when the Angel of Death came to Egypt — the angel passed over the homes who took shelter under the blood of the lamb.

On the day of Atonement, every year, the priests would take two goats — one goat was slain for the sin of the people. And the other had the sins of the people spoken over the goat. And then that goat was carried outside of Jerusalem to die in the wilderness. Atonement and Expiation — sacrifice and cleansing. Sin requires forgiveness but it comes at a cost.

Just as God provided a substitute for Isaac — God provides a substitute for us. God spared Abraham's son, but gave up his Son for us.

Just as the blood of the lamb spared people from God's wrath — the Lamb of God pays the penalty due for sin and redeems those who take shelter under his blood.

Just as the day of atonement required the death of an innocent sacrifice — the Lamb of God carries our sin away and gives his life to cover our sins in our place.

John was willing to live for Christ and even die for Christ because he knew that Jesus was the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Are you looking for a compelling vision — an anchoring why — to provide meaning to your mission and substance to your identity? John says — look no further.

When John saw Jesus for who he really is — it changed him. He saw that he was the long awaited Christ — the Messiah — the final prophet, priest, and king.

The late John Stott wrote...

Jesus is the prophet to end all prophets because he doesn't just bring a message of words — He is The Word become flesh. He is the final word...he is the message to be received. He doesn't point to a way. Jesus said that He was The way.

And he is the priest to end all priests. He doesn't just offer temporary sacrifices of bulls and lambs that need to be done over and over again. He offers himself as the only spotless sacrifice — human for human — a perfect substitute once for all.

He is the king to end all kings. He isn't merely a good king — but He's the perfect king whose authority to reign is his because He made it all. He rules with perfect justice and perfect goodness so that the weak are strong, the vulnerable are protected and people thrive and flourish.

That vision of Jesus — The Lamb of God — the perfect and final prophet, priest, and king — changed John — it gave him his identity. It gave him a mission. It gave him a compelling vision. It provided all he needed to live and die with purpose.