

At the conclusion of John's extraordinary description of Jesus Christ as the Word of God, he jumps into the narrative of Christ's life. His gospel does not include the birth of Christ but begins with the announcement of His coming by His cousin John the Baptist.

Picture of Billy Graham Tent: (leave picture up during this paragraph)

In 1948, a remarkable religious phenomenon occurred in the US. It began in a tent near Hollywood California, under the preaching of a young evangelist. The crowds were sparse at first but as the preaching continued, the crowds began to grow. Finally some rather prominent Hollywood celebrities attended the meetings and were converted. At first, the media totally ignored these gatherings. But when some of Hollywood's well-known names became involved, the press began to take a special interest. Eventually reporters were sent to investigate and interview this rather strange young preacher, who dressed in pistachio-colored suits, wore flaming red ties, spoke with a pronounced Southern accent, and yet had incredible appeal to the masses. It was evident God was doing something. That was the beginning of Billy Graham's career. And as news of those meetings spread across the country, other cities invited him to come and preach and soon Billy Graham's ministry blossomed into what it has become today.

Video: (Will set up)

As it was with Billy Graham in 1948, so it was with John the Baptist in the first century. He too was a young man (in his early 30s). He too dressed rather strangely for his day. He did not wear green suits but animal skins (and ate grasshoppers and wild honey). He too preached a powerful message that seemed to have a great attraction to people. At first they came out by dozens, then hundreds, then thousands left their cities to hear this remarkable desert preacher. Finally the response was so great and this man so popular that even the religious establishment of Jerusalem became curious. They sent a delegation to investigate this strange man with a unique message. John records for us in his Gospel the event.

John the Baptist was prepared for this role by God Himself. His parents were named Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were elderly and childless. Zechariah was a priest in the Jewish temple and one day while preparing to do his duties the angel Gabriel suddenly appears in that sacred space. Zechariah is too stunned to even speak. It has been 400 years since Israel has heard from God. The angel's words shocked him to his core:

*"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name of John. . . he will be great in the sight of the Lord. . . he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah."* Luke 1:12-17 NLT

Later when his mother Elizabeth visited her cousin Mary the future mother of Christ, the meeting overflowed with joy.

*"Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, 'God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy.'" Luke 1:42-43 NLT*

Mary breaks forth in song and you can read that wonderful song of praise in Luke 1:47-55.

After John is born his father shows up at the temple to have him circumcised and he utters this declaration and prophesy spontaneously:

*“ . . .and you my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell His people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.”* Luke 1:76-77 NLT There is a whole lot more to what Mary sang and what Zechariah sang but you will have to read them on your own.

There has never been anyone like John the Baptist! As he grew up he took on the appearance of an Old Testament prophet, wearing a camel hair coat, feeding on locusts and wild honey and spending much alone time with God. He had been preaching and teaching for over a year and had turned the Palestinian world upside down. Large multitudes of people were coming to hear him. In fact the Bible says that King Herod heard him or his message and nearly believed.

This then was the ministry John the Baptist and his view of Jesus the Messiah:

### **1. John reveals himself as just a messenger**

<sup>19</sup> *This was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, “Who are you?”* <sup>20</sup> *He came right out and said, “I am not the Messiah.”* <sup>21</sup> *“Well then, who are you?” they asked. “Are you Elijah?” “No,” he replied. “Are you the Prophet we are expecting?” “No.”* John 1:19-21 NLT

John was aware of the rumors surrounding his ministry. Again, Israel had had no word from God in 400 years and now here he was preaching and teaching with authority and spirit. Verse 20 says that “He came right out and said.” In other words he didn’t mess around but just got right to their point. They were trying to determine if he was an imposter claiming to be the Messiah. I really don’t believe they were looking for the Messiah.

They then asked another question. They wanted to know if he was Elijah. There is a prophecy in the book of Malachi (4:5-6) that says Elijah will come again before the day of the Lord. John reaches back 700 years to the prophesy of Isaiah.

<sup>22</sup> *“Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?”* <sup>23</sup> *John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Clear the way for the LORD’s coming!’”* John 1:22-23 NLT

Notice that he doesn’t say, I am the Word, but I am the voice. He moved the emphasis away from himself and in essence said I am only preparing the road on which the Messiah will come. And then he describes the One who is coming.

<sup>24</sup> *Then the Pharisees who had been sent* <sup>25</sup> *asked him, “If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?”* <sup>26</sup> *John told them, “I baptize with water, but right*

*here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize.<sup>27</sup> Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal."*

What an amazing display of humility and servanthood. Jesus spoke about John the Baptist: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has never arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist."

I want you to think about John the Baptist for a moment more. Do you realize the temptation he must have overcome? He had to know that Jesus was about to become a "rockstar" for lack of a better term. He could have tried to cash in on it. He could have tried to horn in on a little of the action. He could have published a manual on how to live in the desert or how to have "real" devotion to God or any number of other ridiculous notions that could have come to him. But in John 3:30 we read that John said, "He must become greater; I must become less."

**Picture:** One evening the great conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It was a brilliant performance, at the end of which the audience went absolutely wild! They clapped, whistled and stamped their feet, absolutely caught up in the greatness of the performance. As Toscanini stood there, he bowed and bowed and bowed, then acknowledged his orchestra. When the ovation finally began to subside, Toscanini turned and looked intently at his musicians. He was almost out of control as he whispered, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" The orchestra leaned forward to listen. In a fiercely enunciated whisper Toscanini said, "Gentlemen, I am nothing." That was an extraordinary admission since Toscanini was blessed with an enormous ego. He added, "Gentlemen, you are nothing. But Beethoven," said Toscanini in a tone of adoration, "is everything, everything, everything!"

This is the attitude authentic followers of Christ will possess. I am nothing, you are nothing but Christ is everything!

## **2. John reveals Jesus as the Messiah!**

*<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>30</sup> He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'<sup>31</sup> I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel." John 1:29-31 NLT*

John wrestled with this notion of Jesus being the Messiah because to make such a statement was a really big deal. At first he doesn't appear to be sure but as you will see in a few moments he makes the announcement very clearly. Among non-believers in Christ there is still a search for the Messiah. While Christians and Messianic Jews believe that the Messiah has come in the form of Jesus Christ most of the Jewish world is still waiting and the conservative and orthodox Jews are still watching and anticipating the coming of the Messiah.

Even though Christianity started in a Jewish context; Jesus and the first disciples as well as the first several thousand converts were all Jewish, over the years the gospel message of Christ has crossed all nationalities and ethnic borders.

Video: Testimonies from around to world

### 3. John reveals Jesus' mission and message

**The Message:** Jesus offers forgiveness to everyone.

*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*

This statement could have staggered a Jewish crowd because they were familiar with sacrificing lambs.

There was the "Passover lamb" offered once a year as a sin offering. This commemorated the Exodus from Egypt. We see this in Exodus 12:12-13. There were also lambs of burnt offering, the morning and evening sacrifices every day and twice on the Sabbaths. We see this in Lev. 1:4. Then there was the lamb of the trespass offering, which was offered as required when some particular defilement excluded a person from attending worship. We see this in Num. 6:12. In all these cases, lambs were sacrificed to provide legal purification for ceremonial defilement. They visibly demonstrated the need for an atonement in order to remove the pollution and penalty of sin, and effect reconciliation between God and sinners.

The Jewish people were very familiar with the sacrificial lambs they brought to be offered up year after year by the priests, as demanded by the Mosaic Law. And it would be very reasonable for us to think that as John was addressing his Jewish audience here in John 1:29, calling Jesus the Lamb of God that it was in the context of the Old Testament sacrificial system that his words would have been interpreted.

Let me ask you this question. How effective were these sacrifices that the Jewish people brought year after year to be offered up by their priests? They were not effective at all. Listen to Hebrews 10:1-4:

<sup>1</sup> *The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship.* <sup>2</sup> *If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared.* <sup>3</sup> *But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year.* <sup>4</sup> *For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

Hebrews 10:1-4 NLT

The *animal* sacrifices brought by the Jewish people did not take away sin. Obviously there needed to be a better sacrifice, and certainly this was not going to be a lamb brought by the Jewish people year after year to be offered up by their priests.

Rather the better sacrifice was a sacrifice that was provided by God Himself. Listen to these words found in Hebrews 10:5-10:

<sup>5</sup> *That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God,*

*“You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer.*

<sup>6</sup> *You were not pleased with burnt offerings or other offerings for sin. <sup>7</sup> Then I said, ‘Look, I have come to do your will, O God— as is written about me in the Scriptures.’”*

<sup>8</sup> *First, Christ said, “You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings or burnt offerings or other offerings for sin, nor were you pleased with them” (though they are required by the law of Moses). <sup>9</sup> Then he said, “Look, I have come to do your will.” He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. <sup>10</sup> For God’s will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time. Hebrews 10:5-10 NLT*

The older translations say that John cried out, *“Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.”* Behold: means look at Christ. Focus your attention. Stop what you are doing and really take a look at what is going on.

In preparing for this message I came across this story by one particular writer and he related the following story:

Picture: Lamb picture

"I was on a speaking engagement in San Diego, I decided to visit the Timkin Art Museum. I had heard they had an El Greco painting of "St. Peter Holding the Keys to the Kingdom." I paid my money, walked into the museum, found the painting, and looked at the El Greco in admiration.

Then I turned around, on the opposite wall was a small, walnut-colored painting that had been painted in the year 1525. As I looked closely, I saw it was a lamb almost photographically rendered. Around the Lamb's head, barely perceptible, was a halo. As I looked more intently, I saw that the lamb's legs were tied and that the animal, shrouded by the dark background, was lying on a cross.

The title was AGNUS DIE, Latin for "Lamb of God." I wanted to weep. I stood there and looked at that picture for a long time. It was not just the beauty that held me, but the theology of the Atonement. John the Baptist's words kept running circles in my heart."

Jesus didn't come to bury your sins from your memory or to give you a little bath so that you could go write back to the mud and mire of sinfulness. He came to take away your sins. To clean you up until you are a changed person. You don't need to sin every day in word thought and deed although I will admit that is a convenient and comfortable doctrine for some.

Quickly look at the final verses of our text.

**The Mission:** Jesus offers to unleash the power of the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

<sup>32</sup> Then John testified, “I saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and resting upon him. <sup>33</sup> I didn’t know he was the one, but when God sent me to baptize with water, he told me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and rest is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup> I saw this happen to Jesus, so I testify that he is the Chosen One of God.”

John 1:32-34 NLT

Why the Holy Spirit? What is the significance of this introduction?

John’s baptism pictured the removal of sin in preparation for the King, but the baptism of Jesus in the Holy Spirit pictured the bestowal of new *life* in God. In fact, this bestowal of a new life in God was an Old Testament theme.

Let me take you back for a moment to Ezekiel 36:

<sup>24</sup> For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. <sup>25</sup> “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new **spirit** in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. <sup>7</sup> And I will put my **Spirit** in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

The Lamb of God comes to change you completely and take away your sin and through Christ we are able to receive His Holy Spirit who enables us to follow Christ and obey Him.

What an incredible thought. This word ought to create such a hunger in us that we can live or exist with nothing less than giving everything to Christ and truly following Him.

I want you to hear Rena’s story. She is from Albania and is yet one more example of how the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the whole world!

Encounter: Communion (Maybe put lamb picture back up here)

Williams Street Sunday morning: Invitation to come and accept Christ.