

Opening Words

John stated that he was not worthy to take off Jesus' sandals. Now he adds to that. He recognizes that Jesus pre-existed as the Messiah of Israel. He was before all people. He was before creation.

OSL 017 Jesus Meets His First Disciples 1

Weeks had passed since the prophet John had baptized Jesus. What a glorious moment that was! The skies opened, God in heaven spoke, "this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," and the Spirit of God came upon Jesus. The Messiah had been revealed to John, just as God had promised.

But since then – silence. No more voices from heaven and no sign of Jesus. John had watched Jesus walk away from the Jordan River after his baptism and go deep into the dangerous and rocky wilderness of Judea.

Where was Jesus? Why did he just disappear into the wilderness? John had no answer. He could have no answers. He had no idea that while he continued preaching to the crowds Jesus was fighting the great battle in the desert against the great enemy of Israel and mankind.

But John had been fighting battles also. Serious and grim looking men from the authorities in Jerusalem were watching closely. He had rebuked them for their hypocrisy. He had called them the children of snakes. He asked them, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!" Such statements would not go unanswered. One can imagine that many high-level meetings took place in Jerusalem to talk about this strange man in the wilderness, dressed like Elijah of old, to whom the people were flocking.

But it was not just religious authorities. Political authorities, ever wary of the possibility of an uprising, watched closely as hundreds, perhaps thousands gathered to hear this man preach of a new kingdom.

Yes, these were dark times for John as those with power followed his every step. But they would not last forever, and one morning the sun rose in John's heart as he looked in the distance, and he saw Jesus coming back. How long had it been? Six weeks? Seven weeks. John's heart filled with excitement as he saw him, and then, the words burst from his mouth.

"There he is! The one who obediently and faithfully follows the Shepherd of Israel, like a lamb. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

We find these famous words in John 1:29, and as we know from our studies of the bible, lambs figured prominently in the stories of God's people. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were shepherds, keeping sizable herds for food and for profit. When Israel was formed, lambs were part of the sacrificial system. The Mosaic law listed offerings of all kinds, but out of all the sacrificial animal rituals, perhaps the most famous was the Passover Lamb that was offered by families once a year to

remember that fateful night, well over a thousand years before when God directed his people to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts of their homes. When the angel of death passed by, if he saw the blood then he would pass over that house and not bring death. That fateful night in Egypt was the night when Pharaoh let the people go and the great exodus of God's people from the tyranny of Egypt began.

Now, by calling Jesus the lamb of God, John is invoking this image, this event in the history of the people. Jesus was the new Passover lamb who would lead his people into a new exodus of freedom from the many tyrannies that had enslaved them. Remember, this was why John was preaching in the wilderness. He was evoking the memory of God being with his people in the wilderness. This is the reason why John was baptizing, having the people pass through the waters just as their ancestors passed through the waters with Moses. Remember also, that when the Spirit of God came upon Jesus, he came in a dove-like form, evoking the memory of the dove leaving Noah's ark and entering a fresh, new world of God's creation. Now, a fresh, new world awaited the people of God as the Spirit of God came upon this man like a dove.

Let's read more of what John said in 1:30-34:

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." ³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

The ancient world was extremely conscious of honor. It was customary for people to acknowledge those with a higher rank. If all were coming to a dinner table, those of higher rank would be seated first, or the aged would be seated first. But did you notice that John does not honor Jesus because of age, after all, John was born six months before Jesus, nor does he honor him because he has a higher political rank. Those meant nothing to John. He honors Jesus because the Messiah pre-existed. John said, "he was before me." Again, remember, John was conceived six months prior to the virgin conception of Jesus. John is older than Jesus as a man, but John realizes that Jesus is more than a man. John, the greatest of all the prophets (as Jesus would later say) had already stated that he was not worthy even to do the most servile act towards Jesus, to take off his sandals. Now he adds to that. He recognizes that this man, Jesus, pre-existed as the Messiah of Israel. He was before all people. He was before creation, and as we know from the later writings of the apostles, they came to realize that he was the creator himself, the one who made all things who had come to this earth in human form. "He existed before me," John said.

John reminded the people that the primary reason he had come to baptize was so that the Messiah would be revealed. Yes, he came to baptize as a sign of the people's repentance and submission to God's plan, but he reminded the people that he came to baptize because he knew that the Messiah

would be revealed in that act of humility and submission. God told him, “When you see the Spirit come down upon a man, then you will know that that man is the Messiah.” And when John baptized him, the heavens opened, the Spirit came down like a dove upon Jesus and remained upon him.

But there is even more. It is not just that God told him he would see the Spirit upon Jesus. God told him, “When you see the Spirit come upon this man, you will know that this is the One who will give the Spirit to others. This is the one who will baptize God’s people with the Holy Spirit.”

The work of the Holy Spirit in previous centuries was powerful but it was only upon some people, only at certain times, and the Spirit would come and go. But the prophets prophesied that a day would come when the Holy Spirit would come upon all God’s people, rich or poor, young or old, male or female, free or slave. The Holy Spirit would come upon all, and all would experience the life of the kingdom. This new life of the Spirit would empower them to live new, righteous, holy lives and this new life of the Spirit would empower them to do things they never considered possible. That was the promise, and John said, “He is the One. He has the Spirit, and he will give the Spirit.”

Finally, John said, “He is the Chosen One.” Some translations say, “He is the Son of God,” but it means the same thing. The king of Israel was the chosen one of God. As the king, he was adopted into God’s family. These words and titles would be in John’s mind, especially as he thought on the voice from heaven that quoted from the kingly words of Psalm 2 and the servant words of Isaiah 42 which pointed to the Messiah as the king, as the chosen one, as the beloved one. The chosen one, the king, the son of God, the Messiah, whatever term you want to use, John said, “They are all true in him, and he is now with us.”

And so at that moment, to those who were around him, as Jesus walked in the distance, John said, “There he is! There is the Lamb of God. I have seen the Spirit come down from heaven like a dove and remain upon him. He is the Chosen One.”

By the time John finished saying these things Jesus must have walked away. There is no record that he went up to greet John or talk with him, but on the next day, it happened again. John was talking with two of his followers, the fishermen, Andrew and John son of Zebedee when John said, “Look, there he is, behold, the Lamb of God!” By now, after all that I have taught you today, we know he was saying, “The new exodus is upon us, the Passover lamb is before us. Prepare for God’s new deliverance.”

Andrew and John son of Zebedee had heard enough. It was no longer enough to listen to John. They had heard John speak of the coming Messiah often, and for the second time in two days John pointed him out. Andrew and John walked away from the prophet they had been following. It was time to follow Jesus, and in our next lesson we will learn what happened when they first met Jesus.