

# The Lamb of God

John 1:20-34

SS Lesson for 03/01/2015

**Devotional Scripture:** Rev 5:1-14

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## Introduction

### Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson examines how Jesus is **The Lamb of God**. The **study's aim** is to place believing faith in the Christ whom God has revealed. The **study's application** is to understand that trusting in Christ as Savior is grounded in the reality of His identity as the Lamb of God. (*Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary*).

### Key Verse: John 1:29

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

### Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

#### *JOHN'S FIRST WITNESS (1:19-28)*

As in the Synoptic Gospels, the ministry of John the Baptist was so influential that the authorities in **Jerusalem** decided to investigate him. **The Jews** is the author's title for the city's leaders. The **priests and Levites** went to **ask** about his baptism and what he claimed for himself. John said, **I am not the Christ** (i.e., the Messiah). This was his confession, as stressed by the repetition of the verb (in Gr.) **confessed**. Interestingly in response to their questions John's answers were progressively shorter: "I am not the Christ" (v. 20); **I am not** (v. 21); **No** (v. 21). He did not want to talk about himself, for his function was to point to Another. John had an Elijah-type ministry. He appeared on the scene suddenly and even dressed like **Elijah**. He sought to turn people back to God as Elijah did in his day. And Malachi had predicted that Elijah would return before Messiah's coming (Mal. 4:5). Therefore many speculated that John was Elijah. **The Prophet** was expected because of Deuteronomy 18:15 (referring to Christ; cf. John 1:45). Some wrongly understood that the coming "prophet" was to be distinct from the Messiah (v. 24; 7:40-41). **John replied** that he was not any of the expected prophetic figures. He explained, however, that his ministry was described in the Old Testament. He was **the voice**, while Jesus is the Word (Logos). John's function was one of preparation, and it was carried on in **the desert**. (On the meaning of John's quotation from Isa. 40:3, see the comments on Matt. 3:3.) The **Pharisees** were an important sect of Judaism. They numbered about 6,000 and were most influential. They held a strict interpretation of the Law and embraced many oral traditions. The Pharisees were the only minor group to survive the Jewish war of A.D. 66-70, and their teachings formed the basis for Talmudic Judaism. Their question to the Baptizer was, in essence, "Since you have no official title, **why** are you baptizing?" John knew that his baptizing work was only anticipatory. He explained that another **One** was coming who was unknown to them. That coming **One** is so great that John considered himself unworthy to do even the lowliest service for Him (such as untying His **sandals**). The site of **Bethany on the other side of the Jordan River** is now unknown. (It is not to be confused with another Bethany, home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, near Jerusalem.) As early as A.D. 200, Origen, when visiting Palestine, could not find it. A probable site is opposite Jericho.

#### *JOHN'S SECOND WITNESS (1:29-34)*

John's second witness started at the beginning of a series of days (cf. **The next day** in vv. 29, 35, 43; and "On the third day" in 2:1) when Jesus' first disciples were called and came to faith. **John** identified **Jesus** as **the Lamb of God** (cf. 1:36; 1 Peter 1:19). The connection to the Old Testament sacrifices is probably general. The sin offering which bore the sins of the nation on the Day of Atonement was a goat (Lev. 16). Daily offerings were normally lambs, but they did not atone for sin. The Passover lamb (Ex. 12) and Isaiah's mention of the Messiah's likeness to a lamb (Isa. 53:7) may have been in John's mind. John, by the Holy Spirit, saw Jesus as the sacrificial Victim who was to die for **the sin of the world** (cf. Isa. 53:12). John repeated here what he had said earlier about Jesus (vv. 15, 27). John's fame was to be superseded by that of Jesus, whose priority stems from His preexistence: **He was before me**. But why did John say, **I myself did not know Him?** Though John and Jesus were related, as Mary and Elizabeth were relatives (Luke 1:36), nothing is known of any contacts between them in their years of childhood

and adolescence. John did not know that Jesus was the coming One until He was revealed by the Father. All John knew was that he was to prepare the way for Him by **baptizing with water**. God would send His Man **to Israel** in His good time. The baptism of Jesus is not recorded in John's Gospel, but the material of the Synoptic Gospels is assumed. The Fourth Gospel does not state that this descent of **the Spirit** like **a dove** occurred at Jesus' baptism. The significant thing is that the invisible Spirit came **from heaven** and manifested Himself in a bodily (dovelike) form. John saw the Spirit as a dove **remain on** Jesus (cf. Isa. 11:2; Mark 1:10). John had been **told** by God (**the One who sent** him) that when this sign of the dove would occur, the Person so marked out by the Spirit's coming and presence would be the One who would **baptize** by that same **Holy Spirit**. Cleansing by water is one thing, but the cleansing produced by the Spirit is of another order. Later at Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, the baptism with the Holy Spirit brought in a new Age (Acts 1:5; 2:1-3), the Church Age, the "Age of the Spirit" (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). John's testimony was **that this is the Son of God**. The prophesied Davidic King was God's Son (2 Sam. 7:13), and the messianic King is uniquely the Son of God (Ps. 2:7). The title "Son of God" goes beyond the idea of obedience and messianic King to that of Jesus' essential nature. In the Fourth Gospel this title is not applied to believers. They are called "children" (e.g., John 1:12) while "Son" is used only of Jesus.

## ***Lesson Introduction and Background***

### **From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

In modern culture, particularly since the days of the war in Vietnam, the image of a dove has come to serve as a symbol of peace. This symbol was popularized before that by Pablo Picasso, who was commissioned to design a logo for the meeting of the 1949 First International Peace Conference, in Paris. Following his lead, the dove was widely adopted as a symbol for anti-war movements. Those living in the first-century AD also saw the dove as a symbol of peace, but for a very different reason. In Roman culture, the olive branch was often used to represent Eirene, the goddess of peace (think of the word irenic). Some Roman coins bore an image of Eirene holding an olive branch. Imagery of this kind doubtless reminded the earliest Jewish Christians of the story of Noah. As the waters of the great flood began to recede, Noah sent birds from the ark to see if they could find dry land. On the third attempt, one of Noah's doves returned to the ark carrying a freshly plucked olive branch (Genesis 8:9-12). The meaning for the earliest Christians was that peace with God had been restored after the flood, a parallel to eternal peace with God available because of the death of Christ. Consequently, the comforting image of a dove carrying an olive branch was often painted on the walls of burial catacombs and inscribed on sarcophagi in the early centuries of the church. This reminded mourners of hope beyond the grave. Yet Noah and Picasso are not the only sources for the popular connection between doves and peace, as today's lesson reveals.

The ministry of John the Baptist opened a significant chapter in the history of God's communication with humanity. For almost 400 years, no prophet had risen in Israel to speak God's word to the people. The last of the great Hebrew prophets, Malachi, ended his book by predicting that the prophet Elijah would one day reappear to call people to remember the Law of Moses (Malachi 4:4-6). As years, decades, and centuries passed, this promise seemed less and less certain. One can readily understand why John the Baptist's controversial ministry in the wilderness around the Jordan River area, near the very place where Elijah himself had ascended to Heaven in a fiery chariot (compare 2 Kings 2:7-12 with John 1:28), aroused popular interest. John's simple attire (compare 2 Kings 1:8) and sparse diet of locusts and honey (Mark 1:6; Matthew 3:4)—ritually clean food (Leviticus 11:22; 20:24)—complemented his message of repentance and call to justice (Matthew 3:7-10; Luke 3:10-14). All this led at least some of John's contemporaries to speculate that Elijah himself had indeed returned, a speculation that John denied in the literal sense of being Elijah reincarnated (John 1:21; compare Matthew 11:13, 14; 17:10-13; Luke 1:13-17). Instead, John the Baptist openly identified himself as "the voice of one calling in the wilderness" (John 1:23) that was predicted in Isaiah 40:3. This identification stressed his role as the forerunner to the Lord's appearance. John's designation as "the Baptist" is helpful to us for not confusing him with the apostle John, who wrote the Gospel from which today's lesson is drawn.

While modern readers of the Bible may be most captivated by John the Baptist's diet, attire, and radical message, a most distinctive feature of his ministry was the fact that he baptized people in water (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26). Ritual or ceremonial washings (known as lustrations) as a means of removing impurities from hands, eating utensils, and even the entire body were common in first-century Judaism (Mark 7:1-4; Luke 2:22; John 2:6; 3:25; compare Leviticus 11:32; 14:8, 9; 15:4-12, 16-22, 25-27; Ezekiel 36:25). Faithful Jews, desiring to avoid anything that might make them "unclean" in God's sight, would wash themselves regularly in running streams or pools of water. John, however, gained notoriety for washing other people, a practice unheard of at the time.

Since washing with water was viewed as a sign of self-purification, then almost by definition it would not occur to Jews that one person could wash another—no person could secure another person's purity that way. For John the Baptist, however, water baptism represented the cleansing of the soul that came through genuine repentance (Luke 3:3; Matthew 3:11; compare Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5). Such repentance was critical in view of the fact that God was soon to establish his kingdom on earth. John associated this event with the coming of a figure much greater than himself (Mark 1:7; Acts 13:25). This figure to come would baptize people not with water but rather "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16), symbols of a much deeper and more thorough cleansing from sin. Within the larger context of his baptizing ministry, John also baptized Jesus himself. The first three Gospels mark Jesus' baptism as the beginning of his public ministry (see especially Luke 3:21-23). Jesus' baptism, not recorded in the Gospel of John, had already occurred at the point in time of today's lesson (see Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11). The location as our text opens is "at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan" (John 1:28).

## Major Theme Analysis

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### ***The Lamb That Takes Away Sin (John 1:29)***

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

#### **Jesus is the Lamb**

*The Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:6-13)*

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." 11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" 13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!"

*The Lamb without blemish (1 Peter 1:19)*

19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

*The Lamb that overcomes (Rev 17:14)*

14 They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings — and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

*The Lamb that is the light (Rev 21:23)*

23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

## **Takes away sin**

*Takes away sin by taking our sins upon Himself (2 Cor 5:21)*

21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

*Takes away sin by giving Himself for our sins (Gal 1:4)*

4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

*Takes away sin by redeeming us from sin (Titus 2:14)*

14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

*Takes away sin by purifying us of sin (Heb 1:3)*

3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

*Takes away sin by sacrificing Himself for our sins (Heb 9:28)*

28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

*Takes away sin by atoning for our sins (1 John 2:2)*

2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

*Takes away sin by appearing to take away our sins (1 John 3:5)*

5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.

*Takes away sin by manifesting God's love (1 John 4:10)*

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

## **The Lamb That Is The Revealed Messiah (John 1:30-33)**

30 This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'

31 I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water."

32 And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.

33 I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

## **Messiah that is preferred (30)**

*Preferred because of His power (Matt 3:11)*

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.

*Preferred because He is above all (John 3:31)*

31 "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.

*Preferred because all will confess Him Lord (Phil 2:9-11)*

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### **Messiah that was revealed (31-32)**

#### *Revealed glory of God (Isa 40:5)*

5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

#### *Revealed fellowship (1 John 1:2-4)*

2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

#### *Revealed grace (2 Tim 1:9-10)*

9 This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

### **Messiah that baptizes with the Holy Spirit (33)**

#### *Baptized with the Holy Spirit because it was promised (Acts 11:15-16)*

15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

#### *Baptized with the Holy Spirit into the body of believers (1 Cor 12:13)*

13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

#### *Baptized with the Holy Spirit as a gift (Acts 2:38)*

38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Lamb That Is the Son of God (John 1:34)**

34 And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

### **Seen as the Son of God**

#### *Seen as the Son of God by demons (Matt 8:28-29)*

28 When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. 29 "What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?"

#### *Seen as the Son of God by His disciples (John 6:67-69)*

67 "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

*Seen as the Son of God because Jesus is the exact representation of God's being (Heb 1:2-3)*

2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

## **Testified as the Son of God**

*Testified as the Son of God by God Himself (Matt 3:17)*

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

*Testified as the Son of God by a centurion (Matt 27:54)*

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

*Testified as the Son of God by angels (Luke 1:35)*

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

*Testified as the Son of God by Peter (Matt 16:16)*

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

## **Conclusion and Other Thoughts**

### ***Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh***

We have already seen that John is exceedingly popular. The unusual circumstances surrounding his birth aroused interest and curiosity, if not hope (Luke 1:65-66), and his public ministry fueled the flames of Israel's messianic hopes: "While the people were filled with anticipation, and they all pondered in their hearts whether perhaps John could be the Christ" (Luke 3:15). John drew large crowds, and many were going to him for baptism. John recognizes some of these baptismal candidates as insincere, and he appears to refuse to baptize them (Luke 3:7-9). John is of a priestly line, although his ministry is certainly independent of official mainline Judaism. Early in his youth, he retreats to the deserts to live until the time comes for him to commence his public ministry (Luke 1:80), and even then his ministry is conducted in the wilderness rather than in Jerusalem or any city (Luke 3:1-3). While it seems that nearly every segment of society is represented in the crowd which comes to hear John and to be baptized by him (see Luke 3:10-14), one group is conspicuously absent (Luke 7:30). Are these Pharisees some of those John refused to baptize? It does not seem likely. Luke does not tell us John refuses to baptize them, but that they refuse John's baptism. I am therefore inclined to believe these Pharisees and lawyers are folks who never went out to the wilderness to hear John. In fact, I am inclined to think these same Pharisees and lawyers are those who sent the delegation to John to inquire who he claimed to be, and just what his ministry was about. We know from our Lord's later words that the scribes and Pharisees loved a following (Matthew 23:15). From what the Gospels tell us, it also seems that these Pharisees were not inclined to give up the place they had made for themselves: "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called the council together and said, 'What are we doing? For this man is performing many miraculous signs. If we allow him to go on in this way, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away our sanctuary and our nation'" (John 11:47-48). It is neither orthodoxy, nor a love for the truth, which motivates these religious leaders, but garden variety jealousy (see Matthew 27:18). "**The Jews**" who send the delegation to investigate John the Baptist and his ministry are the religious elite of that day, Jews who hold positions of power which they are not inclined to give up, either to John or to Jesus. These men do not come to John personally, for this would acknowledge John's importance. Instead, they send a lower level delegation of "**priests and Levites**"<sup>55</sup> to John, telling them what to ask, and by so doing, send John a signal that they are in power: they are the ones who accredit the ministry of others. In their minds, they issue religious franchises to men like John, and he can only operate with their permission and under their authority. John is being

interrogated like a recent seminary graduate going through an ordination exam. The first question the delegation asks is, “**Who are you?**” (verse 19). No one in this delegation seems able to actually speak the word “Messiah.” They do not ask directly, “Are you the Messiah?” But John knows this is the essence of their question. Thus he answers, “**I am not the Christ**” (verse 20), which prompts a sequence of follow-up questions. If John is not the Christ, is he Elijah (verse 21)? This question arises due to the prophecy of Malachi (Malachi 4:4-6). This question about Elijah, and the answer John gives, may pose a problem for some because of what Luke and our Lord said about John (Luke 1:15-17; Matthew 11:11-14). How can John the Baptist say he is not Elijah, when Jesus says that he is? The answer may not be difficult. You may remember that Elijah did not die, but was taken into heaven in a chariot of fire, so that his body could not be found (see 2 Kings 2:1-17). It seems some expected Elijah to return in person. John rightly denies being Elijah in person. Yet, we read in Luke’s Gospel that John the Baptist will go before Messiah “**in the spirit and power of Elijah**” (Luke 1:17). Jesus then tells His disciples that John is “**Elijah who is to come**” (Matthew 11:14) and prefaces His statement with, “**If you are willing to receive it.**” Thus, John is a kind of Elijah, who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah, fulfilling (or partially fulfilling) the prophecy of Malachi 4. John both *is* and *is not* Elijah. He *is* Elijah in spirit; he *is not* literally Elijah in the flesh.

If John is not Elijah, then is he “**the Prophet**”? “**The Prophet**” must refer to the “**Prophet like Moses**,” prophesied in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). This “**Prophet like Moses**” is not John the Baptist; He is the One for whom John is the forerunner, the Messiah. And so John quickly responds “No” to their question about him being this Prophet (John 1:21). Here is a man of very few words, and his responses are becoming shorter and shorter. The longer response of verse 23 is a quotation of Scripture taken from Isaiah 40, verse 3. This delegation of less-than-prominent Jewish officials is becoming concerned. They have been sent to put John on the spot by asking for his credentials and his agenda. As they press him with possible options, he persistently answers in the negative. He is *not* the Messiah, *not* Elijah, *not* the Prophet. Who, then, is he? These fellows must return to Jerusalem with a report, and yet they have almost nothing to tell the Jewish Sanhedrin. They must fill out their “report forms,” and John is of no help at all. And so they press John to tell them who he is. They do not really want to hear his answer, because it is merely the citation of a text from the Prophet Isaiah: “*I am* ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD,”’ as the prophet Isaiah said” (Isaiah 40:3). John’s answer is still not satisfactory. Here is a man who virtually refuses to dwell on himself. Verse 24 presents some problems for Bible scholars. It is not entirely clear whether John is telling us:

- that a second delegation is present, sent by the Pharisees; or,
- that some in the first delegation have been sent by the Pharisees; or,
- that the whole delegation formerly referred to has been sent by the Pharisees.

It really does not matter greatly. We know that the question about to be asked expresses the concerns of the Pharisees. If John is not the Messiah, not Elijah, and not the Prophet, then what in the world is he doing baptizing (verse 24)? Baptism was not a new or novel ritual to the Israelites. Baptism was one of the rituals by which Gentiles were brought into Judaism as proselytes. John’s baptism is distressing in light of the meaning and use of baptism in Judaism. These were not *Gentiles* who were being baptized, but Jews. These were not *Gentiles* who were being indicted for their sin and warned of God’s coming wrath, but Jews. John was treating Jews as though they were lost sinners, in need of salvation. Most distressing of all, many Jews were believing John and coming to him for baptism. Jewish religious leaders had convinced their Jewish followers that simply being Jewish and keeping the Law (as they interpreted it) was sufficient to save them. John’s ministry and message said otherwise. The Jewish religious system was under siege, and it looked at the moment as though John was prevailing. Of all those who were threatened, the legalistic Pharisees (along with the status quo Sadducees) were most often singled out by John (see Matthew 3:7-9). Those sent by the Pharisees challenge John to defend his practice of baptizing those who follow him. If he is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, then why is he baptizing? The Baptist does not really answer their question, at least in an immediate response. We are inclined to anticipate the way he will finish his response by the way he begins: “**I baptize with water, but ...**” We immediately supply what we have read elsewhere: “**He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire**” (see Matthew 3:11-12; Luke 3:15-16). But the Apostle John does not include these words. The Baptist does not want to get into a debate about baptism, whether it be his baptism or that of the Messiah to come. The Baptist continues to press the point that the Apostle John has been underscoring in this first chapter of his Gospel—the supremacy of Christ and the subordination of John, His forerunner. This delegation wants John to talk about himself and his ministry. But John’s ministry is to magnify the Christ—to focus Israel’s attention on Him. He cannot do so by talking about himself, and so he answers their question about baptism by once again emphasizing the superiority of the coming One, by whom he is outranked. This coming One is somewhere among them, but simply not yet designated. They have not recognized

Him either (verse 26). This One outranks John the Baptist, because He existed before John. John begins his Gospel by declaring the Word to be God, who existed before time and creation began. Now the Baptist chooses to underscore the same fact in his response to his questioners. The One who “**was**” in the beginning is the One who *is* among them and who is soon to be designated as the Messiah. This One “**was**,” but John “**came**.” *This One is God*, while John tells us that he is simply a man, sent by God. This One is so much greater than the Baptist that John says he is unworthy to loose his sandal straps (verse 27). We are told that “**these things**” took place in Bethany (NIV, NAV, NAB) or Bethabara (KJV, NKJV). But no one knows exactly where this place is—or was. It cannot be the Bethany near Jerusalem, where Martha, Mary, and Lazarus lived (John 11:1, 18; 12:1). The “Bethany” of which John writes is “**beyond the Jordan**.” There could be more than one city in Israel with the same name, so the fact that there were two Bethany’s is no real problem. Even the fact that the location of this place is not known should come as no surprise. When the Jews sought to stone Jesus, He is said to have gone “**beyond the Jordan to the place where John was baptizing at first**” (John 10:39-40). It should be safe to conclude that Jesus departed to an out-of-the-way place, where He could not be easily found. If this were the “Bethany” of our text, we would expect that few knew of it, and that none would know today where it once was.

If the Gospel of John includes a great deal of new material, there is also a lot of material in the Synoptic Gospels which is not in John. The Synoptic Gospels record the baptism of our Lord by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22). In his Gospel, Matthew emphasizes John’s humility at the time of our Lord’s baptism. If—as John has been constantly saying—our Lord is vastly superior to him, then why should John baptize Jesus? Should Jesus not baptize him? Matthew’s words tell us even more—they tell us that John has some inkling before His baptism that Jesus is the Messiah. John protests against baptizing Jesus because Jesus is the greater One. Jesus convinces John to baptize Him “**to fulfill all righteousness**” (Matthew 3:15). In being baptized, Jesus identifies Himself with John, and thus with John’s message and ministry. More importantly for John, in the process of baptizing Jesus, God confirms Him as the promised Messiah. The Synoptic Gospels all speak of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and remaining upon Jesus. All the Gospels tell of God the Father’s testimony, coming from heaven, declaring Jesus to be His beloved Son, in Whom He is well pleased. John’s Gospel alone explains the significance of our Lord’s baptism to John the Baptist. All the time John has been preaching, telling the Israelites that the Messiah is coming, the Baptist has not known the identity of Messiah for certain. As mentioned, John may have had his suspicions, but he does not have absolute proof. That proof comes at the baptism of Jesus. One day, John the Baptist is proclaiming to the people of Israel that Messiah is among them—but not yet identified. The next day, John is pointing to Jesus, testifying that He is the Messiah—the One of whom he has been speaking, and declaring, “**Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world**” (John 1:29). What made the dramatic difference in the Baptist’s preaching from one day to the next? It is what John the Baptist saw and heard at the baptism of our Lord. When, under protest, John baptizes Jesus, he sees the Spirit descend upon Him and remain upon Him. He hears the voice of the Father from heaven, declaring Jesus to be His beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased. He now knows for certain who the Messiah is, and from this point on, He refers to Jesus as God’s Messiah, the Son of God (verse 34).

*(Adapted from URL: <https://bible.org/seriespage/witness-john-john-119-37>)*

### **Concluding Thoughts from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator**

A pivotal figure can be thought of as someone who stands at the crossover point between two periods of history and is instrumental in bringing about the transition from one to the other. An Old Testament example is Samuel. As the last of the judges (Acts 13:20) and the first of the prophets (Acts 3:24), he played a key role in Israel’s transition to monarchy (1 Samuel 8–10). John the Baptist is no less a pivotal figure, his ministry signaling that a transition was underway. In a sense, this “voice calling in the wilderness” was both the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. His testimony still rings forth today: Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). May we proclaim this until Jesus, the final and ultimate pivotal figure, presents himself at his glorious second coming.

***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator***

1. Forgiveness of sin is ours only through faith in Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29)
2. Believers serve God freely because Jesus' perfect sacrifice has released us from the power and penalty of sin
3. As Christians humble ourselves before God, He accomplishes His work through us (vss. 30-31)
4. Through the Holy Spirit, believers live for God and share His message of salvation with the world (vss. 32-33)
5. All people are seeking something, and the believer's job is to point them to Christ (vs. 34)